Men-at-Arms

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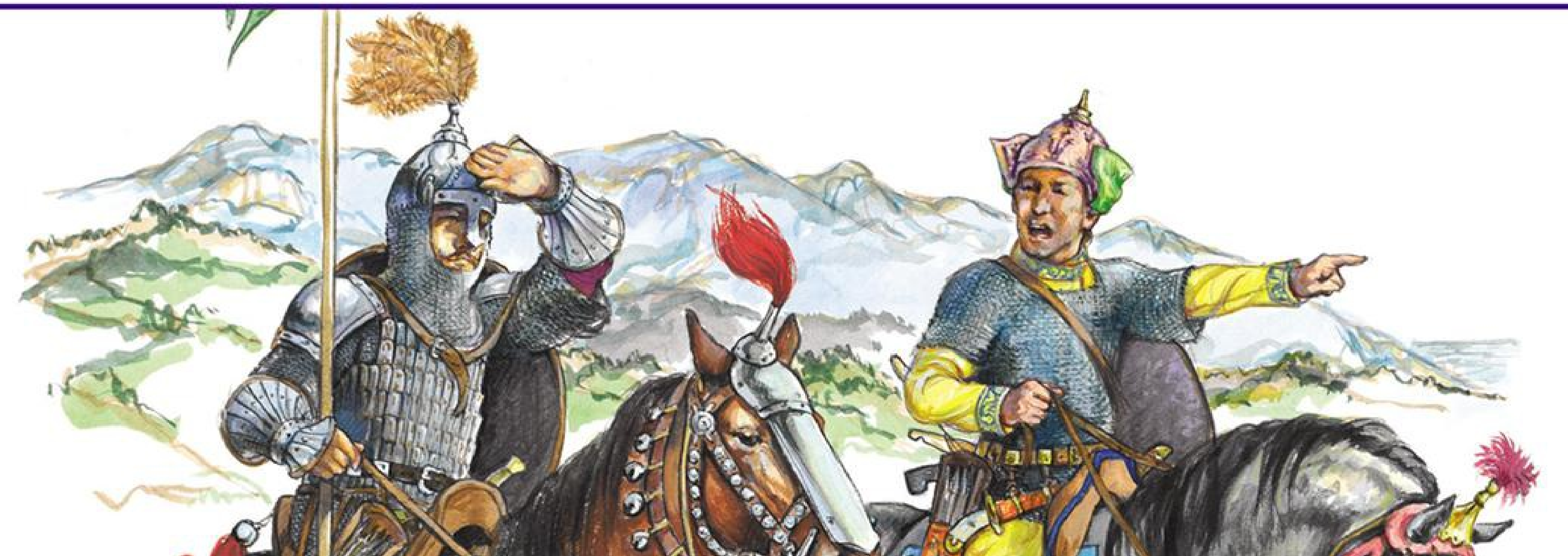
The Khazars

A Judeo-Turkish Empire on the Steppes, 7th–11th Centuries AD



Mikhail Zhirohov & David Nicolle • Illustrated by Christa Hook

Men-at-Arms • 522

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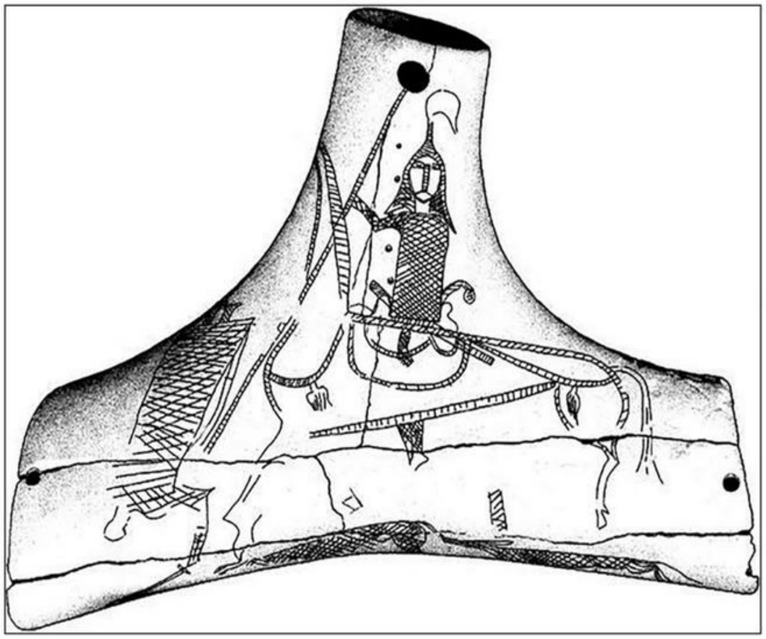

Mikhail Zhirohov • Illustrated by Christa Hook
& David Nicolle Series editor Martin Windrow

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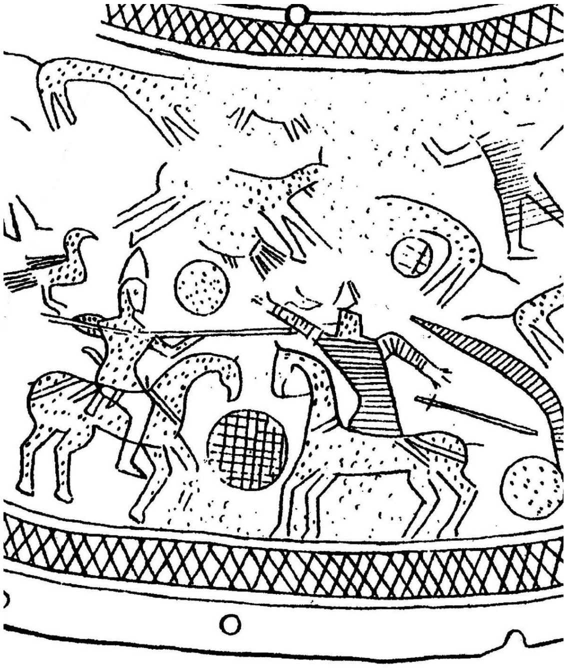
THE KHAZARS 7th–11th CENTURIES

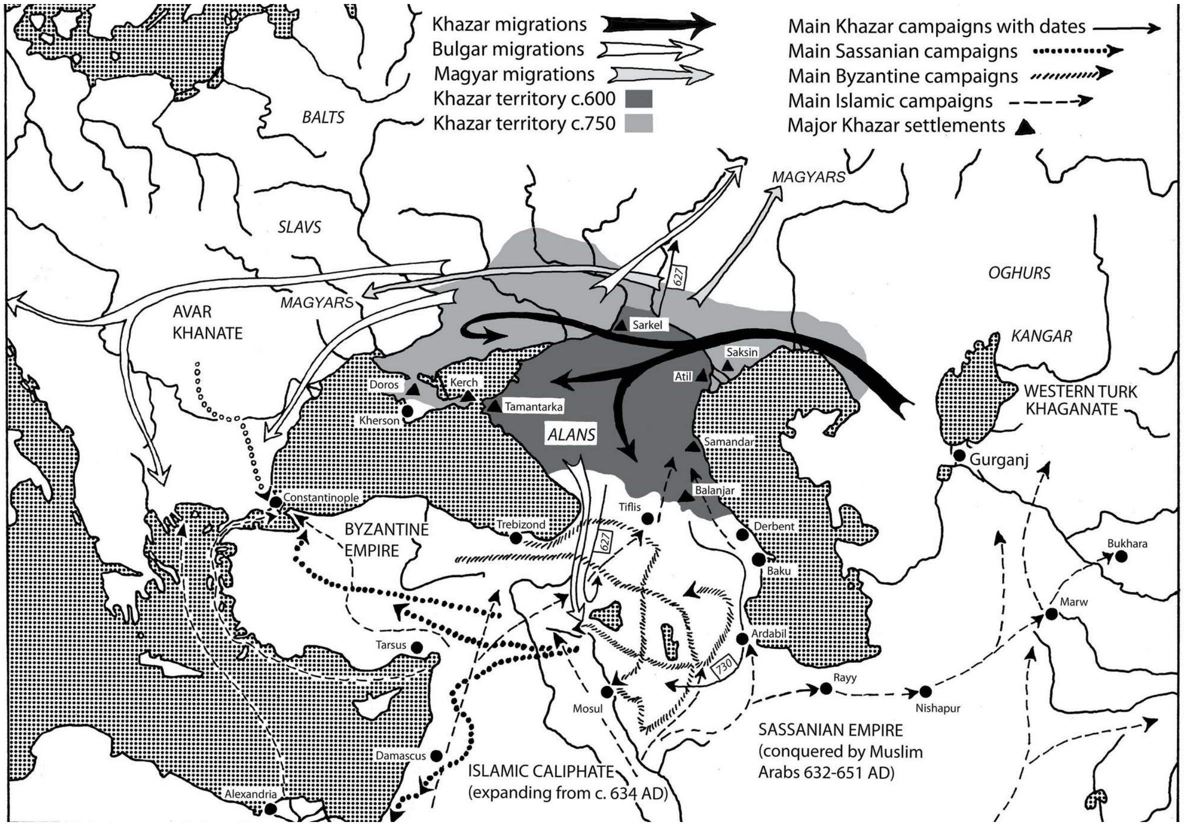
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of the Khazar Khaganate, which for many years dominated the steppes of South-Eastern Europe as well as much of the steppe territory of Western Asia, is important for a proper understanding of the history of early medieval Eastern Europe. Both extensive and enduring, this power straddled several important trade routes, serving as a channel for ideas, technologies and artistic influences mostly (though not only) from East and South to North and West. Furthermore, the Khazars played a major role in the struggle between the competing Christian and Islamic empires.

An independent Khazar state emerged in the 7th century, primarily based upon the lower courses of the mighty Volga and Don rivers. The Khazar Khaganate then expanded to incorporate under its rule or influence an array of differing peoples, from the originally nomadic Turkic Khazars themselves, to partially nomadic Alans who spoke an Iranian language; Bulgars (Bulghars), who were then still Turkic rather than Slavic; Burtas, whose linguistic identity remains a matter of dispute; Finno-Ugrian Mari of the mountains, forest and river plains; semi-nomadic Magyars, who were ancestors of today's Hungarians; and nomadic Turkic Pechenegs, who would eventually inherit the western steppes as the Khazars faded from history. A number of Eastern Slav tribal associations were similarly dominated by the sprawling Khazar Khaganate. All these peoples paid tribute to the Khazar rulers, and were, at various times and to varying degrees, under Khazar domination – although in many cases this relationship was based upon mutually beneficial trade rather than military force. The Khazarian state (i.e. the multi-ethnic polity dominated by the Khazars) existed for about 300 years before it collapsed in the mid-10th century – a long time for a steppe empire based upon largely or partly nomadic tribes. Furthermore, the Khazars left a significant mark on the history of a large part of Eastern Europe and beyond.



Khazar engraved bone object from Maiaky, Ukraine, depicting men in combat. Despite the naive technique the armoured lancer (bottom left) is shown in some detail: helmet, mail coif and hauberk, and, on the far side, what may be the end of a cased bow, are all discernible. The other rider's armour is differentiated, perhaps to suggest a lamellar cuirass; the shaded discs may represent discarded shields. (Archive of M Zhirohov)


Khazar migrations
Bulgar migrations
Magyar migrations
Khazar territory c.600 ■
Khazar territory c.750 ▒
Main Khazar campaigns with dates
Main Sassanian campaigns
Main Byzantine campaigns
Main Islamic campaigns
Major Khazar settlements ▲
BALTS
SLAVS
MAGYARS
OGHURS
627
AVAR KHANATE
MAGYARS
Sarkel
KANGAR
Saksin
Atil
Doros
Kerch
Tamantarka
WESTERN TURK KHAGANATE
Kherson
ALANS
Samandar
Gurganj
Balanjar
Constantinople
Tiflis
BYZANTINE EMPIRE
Trebizond
Derbent
627
Bukhara
Baku
Marw
Tarsus
Ardabil
730
Rayy
Mosul
Nishapur
SASSANIAN EMPIRE (conquered by Muslim Arabs 632-651 AD)
Damascus
ISLAMIC CALIPHATE (expanding from c. 634 AD)
Alexandria

Map showing the rise of the Khazars in the 7th–8th centuries AD. (David Nicolle)

Origins

According to the Byzantine emperor and chronicler Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (ruled [r.] AD 913–959), the original Khazars were Turks. However, some other writers believe they had similar Finno-Ugrian origins to the Magyars or Hungarians, and still others maintain that they had comparable origins to the Georgians of the Caucasus. Such uncertainties are common with regard to early-medieval steppe peoples, but in the case of the Khazars the issue has latterly become entangled with unpleasantly racist rather than simply scholarly concerns. In the 8th century the Khazars, or at least their ruling elite, converted to Judaism; consequently, their history has aroused a sometimes anti-semitic interest in the pretended 'Jewish ethnicity' of communities of Eastern European, Caucasus and Central Asian origins, or in the Turkic rather than semitic origins of Eastern European Jewish communities.

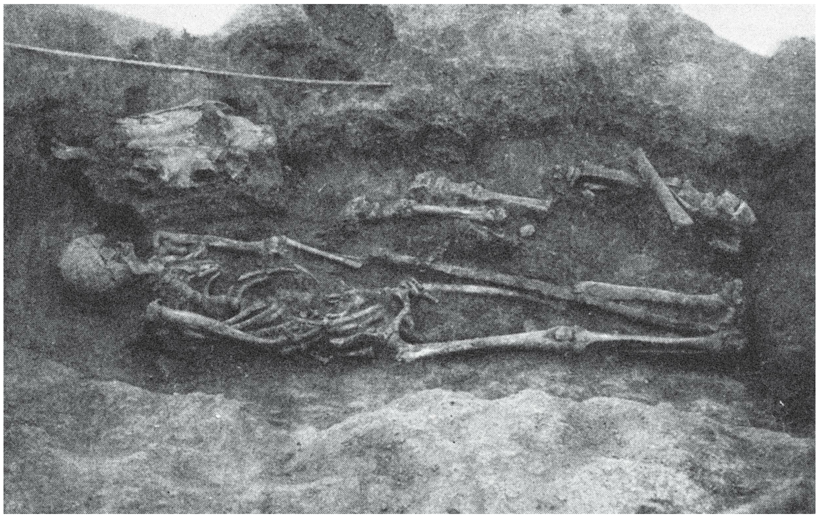
The first reliable written source concerning the Khazars might date from as early as the 2nd century AD, when tribes later sometimes identified as Khazars occupied land north of the Caucasus, clashing with Armenians and enjoying notable success until the 4th century. Whether or not they really were ethnically related to the later Khazars is nevertheless questionable. During the astonishing expansion of the vast but ephemeral Hun Empire in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, these possible proto-Khazars disappear from history, but when they suddenly re-emerge in the 6th century they already control a large territory. In the east, their lands bordered nomadic tribes known simply as Turks; in the north their neighbours were Finnish tribes; in the west, they were Turkic Bulgars; while in the south, Khazar territory bordered that of the Alans and reached the River Araxes (Aras). Once they had freed themselves from the Huns, the Khazars consolidated their own power and began to threaten neighbouring peoples. Indeed, the Khazars became so troublesome that the Sassanian Persian ruler or *Shahinshah* Kavadh I (r. AD 488–496 and 498–531) and his son Khusrow I (531–579) had long fortifications built from the mountains to the sea in northern Shirvan. Repaired and rebuilt many times, parts of these impressive Walls of Derbent are visible to this day.

During the 7th century the Khazars took advantage of divisions among their long-standing Bulgar rivals to seize control of territory north of the Black Sea. Thereafter the loose association of Bulgar tribes split apart, some migrating north to establish a new state around the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers (see MAA 491, *Armies of the Volga Bulgars & Khanate of Kazan*). Some migrated into the Balkans to establish a state which still exists as Bulgaria, and others fled even further afield, but some remained in place under Khazar rule.

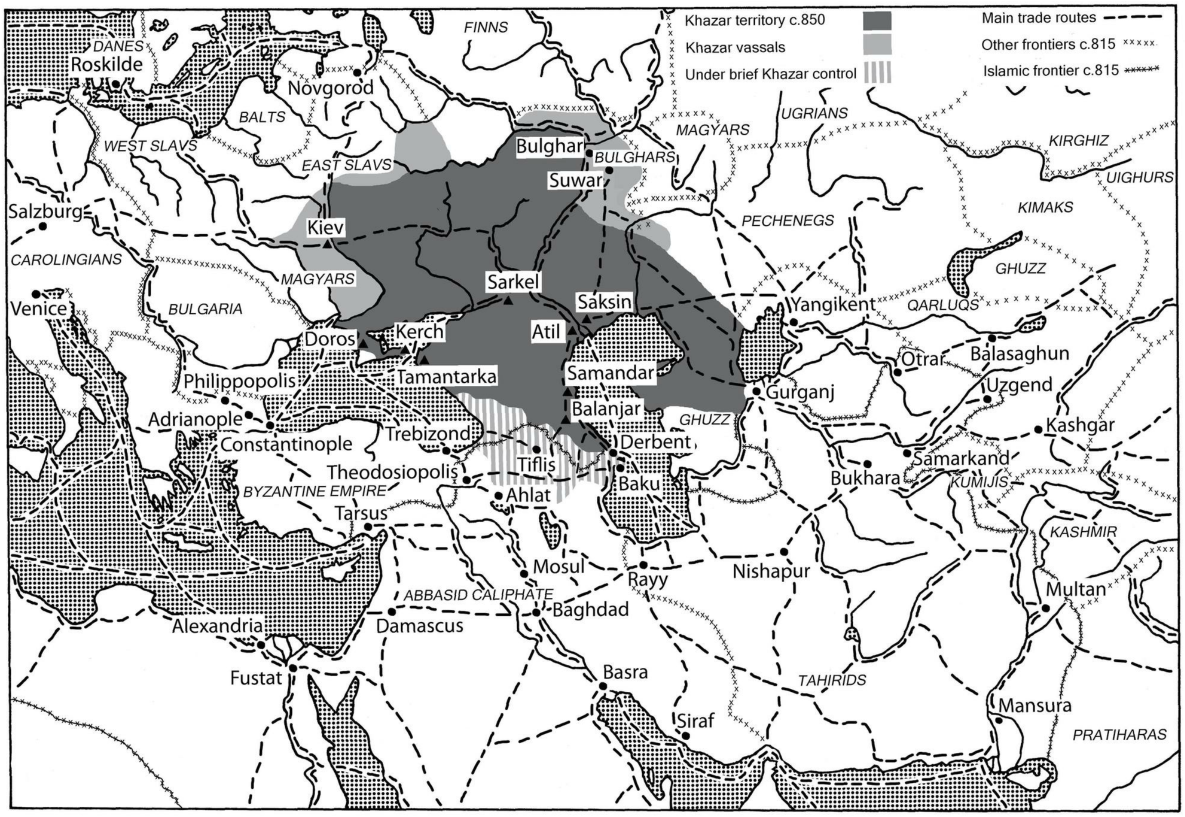
It was also during the early 7th century that the Byzantine Empire started paying serious attention to this rising new power. Clearly the Khazar tribes could have endangered the Byzantines, so the latter offered gifts and, in time-honoured fashion, formed links by marriage with the Khazar ruling family. It was by such means that the Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641) was able to win the Khazars to his side in Byzantium's final war with the Sassanian Empire.

This proved to be a fleeting victory, followed almost immediately by the sudden and unexpected eruption of the newly Muslim Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula. Byzantine armies were tumbled back to what would become the Empire's heartland of Anatolia, while the weakened Sassanian Empire collapsed entirely. A newly emergent superpower, the Islamic Caliphate, soon challenged the Khazars themselves. Now a genuine Byzantine-Khazar alliance developed (though subsequently some Byzantines would advocate a different alliance with Alans and Ghuzz against the Khazars).

Attempts by the Khazars to oppose Arab-Islamic expansion were initially unsuccessful, although their forces achieved some victories. When their capital at Balanjar just north of the Caucasus was sacked, the Khazars moved their centre a short distance north to Samandar on the Caspian coast. After this too was destroyed the Khazar capital was moved again, this time to Atil (or Itil) in the delta of the Volga River. Only a defeat of the Muslims on the banks of the Bolangira saved Khazaria from collapse, and thereafter Atil remained the administrative centre of the Khaganate until the Khazar state was eclipsed in the 960s AD.



A typical grave of a Khazar warrior and his horse from the northern Caucasus. Note the considerable length of the sabre lying across his left leg. (Archive of M Zhirohov)


Khazar territory c.850
Khazar vassals
Under brief Khazar control
Main trade routes
Other frontiers c.815
Islamic frontier c.815
FINNS
DANES
Roskilde
Novgorod
BALTS
WEST SLAVS
EAST SLAVS
Bulghar
BULGHARS
Suwar
UGRIANS
MAGYARS
KIRGHIZ
UIGHURS
KIMAKS
PECHENEGS
Salzburg
Kiev
CAROLINGIANS
MAGYARS
Sarkel
Saksin
GHUZZ
Venice
BULGARIA
Yangikent
QARLUQS
Kerch
Atil
Doros
Otrar
Balasaghun
Tamantarka
Samandar
Philippopolis
Gurganj
Uzgend
Balanjar
Adrianople
GHUZZ
Constantinople
Trebizond
Derbent
Kashgar
Theodosiopolis
Tiflis
Baku
Samarkand
Bukhara
BYZANTINE EMPIRE
Ahlat
KUMIJIS
Tarsus
KASHMIR
Mosul
Rayy
Nishapur
ABBASID CALIPHATE
Multan
Baghdad
Alexandria
Damascus
Fustat
Basra
TAHIRIDS
Mansura
Siraf
PRATIHARAS

Map of the Khazar Khaganate at its greatest extent, in the 9th century AD. (David Nicolle)

Expansion

The intermittent campaigns of the ‘Second Arab-Khazar War’ lasted for around 80 years, and involved sometimes devastating raids by both sides, with Muslims striking north of the Caucasus and Khazars striking south. In practice, however, both sides proved more successful in defence than attack, and so a narrow strip of land between the eastern end of the Caucasus and the shores of the Caspian remained a war-torn and fluctuating frontier zone. By achieving a relatively stable front with the Muslims, and an alliance with the Byzantine Empire around the Black Sea, the Khazars were able to expand in other directions. Around 894, in alliance with Ghuzz Turks, they defeated the Turkish Pechenegs to their east and the Magyars who lived in the 'forest-steppe' region north-east of the Black Sea. Even before these successes the Khazars had subjugated Slav peoples along the Dnieper River north-west of the Black Sea. Thus, by the 9th and 10th centuries, Khazar territory stretched from the northern foothills of the Caucasus to the 'lands of the northmen' and the Slavic Radimich people, across much of what are now Russia, Ukraine and even part of Belarus.

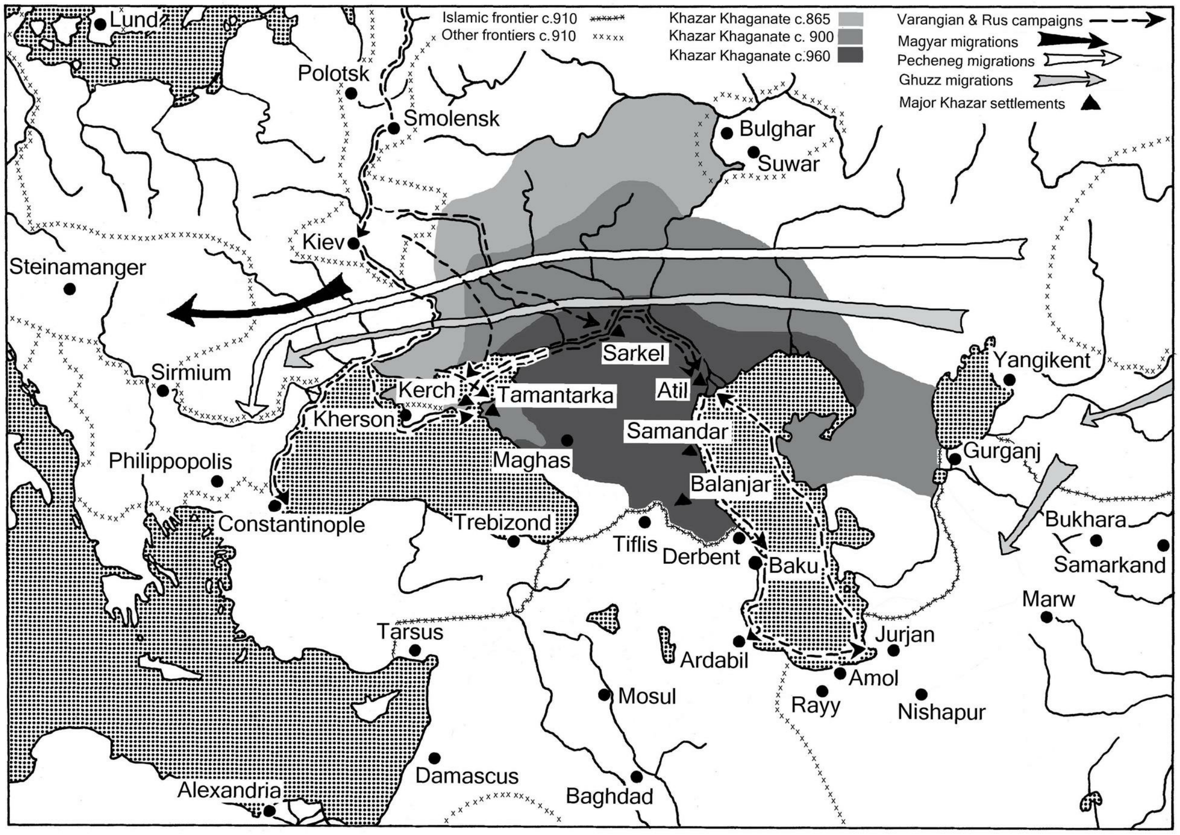
Decline and fall

By the 10th century, however, the Khaganate's Viking nemesis was approaching, with the emergence of the Rus north of Khazar territory. This first Russian state gradually brought together many Eastern Slav tribes under the rule of Prince Oleg 'the Seer' of Novgorod and latterly of Kiev (879–912), subjugating some tribes which had previously been tributary to the Khazars.

In 965 or 966 Prince Svyatoslav Igorevich of Kievan Rus invaded Khazaria, and won a victory so decisive that it spelled the end of the Khazar Khaganate as a major power. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 11th century two small Khazar principalities still remained. One, centred upon Kerch at the eastern tip of the Crimean peninsula, survived until 1016, when it was crushed by Byzantine and Rus forces. Its Khazar population had earlier converted to Karaite Judaism, which recognizes the validity of only the 24 books of the Tanakh (roughly equivalent to the Christian Old Testament) but not that of the Talmud. In medieval Russian chronicles the final mention of Khozars or Khazars as a distinct people is found in 1079, though the term 'Khazarian' continued to be used even into the 15th century to describe some vassals of the Muscovite princes.

Another small Khazar principality survived in what is now Daghestan on the north-eastern slopes of the Caucasus. Centred around Samandar, which had briefly been the capital of the great Khazar Khaganate, this partially

Jewish principality survived until it was destroyed by the Mongols in the 1220s. A third Khazar community may have existed around Saksin in the Volga Delta, as an autonomous region under the Muslim rulers of Khwarazm, though some scholars deny any real associations with the previous Khazar Khaganate. Its people converted to Islam, and were absorbed into the wider Islamic world.


Islamic frontier c.910
Other frontiers c.910
Khazar Khaganate c.865
Khazar Khaganate c. 900
Khazar Khaganate c.960
Varangian & Rus campaigns
Magyar migrations
Pecheneg migrations
Ghuzz migrations
Major Khazar settlements
Lund
Polotsk
Smolensk
Bulghar
Suwar
Kiev
Steinamanger
Sirmium
Sarkel
Atil
Yangikent
Kerch
Tamantarka
Kherson
Samandar
Maghas
Gurganj
Philippopolis
Balanjar
Constantinople
Trebizond
Bukhara
Tiflis
Derbent
Baku
Samarkand
Marw
Tarsus
Jurjan
Ardabil
Amol
Mosul
Rayy
Nishapur
Damascus
Alexandria
Baghdad

Map showing the Khazar Khaganate's decline in the 10th century AD. (David Nicolle)

CHRONOLOGY

Events

AD 371 The Huns conquer the steppes north of the Black Sea.
515–516 Hunno-Sabirian invasion of Armenia.
540 Sabiri raid south of the Caucasus.
552 Death of *Khagan* Bumin (Tumin), founder of the Turkic Khaganate in Central Asia; joint assault by Sabiri and Khazars upon ‘Caucasian Albanians’ (vassals of the Sassanian Empire, in present-day Azerbaijan).
562 Defeat of the Sabiri-Khazar alliance by Sassanian ruler Khusrow I Anushirvan.
567–571 Khazar and Bulgar territories between the Caspian and Black Seas fall under Turkish Khaganate.
576 War begins between Byzantine Empire and Turkic Khaganate.
626 Alliance of Byzantine Empire and Turkic Khagan against Sassanian Empire; Turkic and subordinate Khazar armies strike south of Caucasus.
628 Khazars conquer ‘Caucasian Albania’ (largely in present-day Azerbaijan).
632 Formation of Great Bulgaria in the western steppes.
***c*. 650** Khazar tribes establish Khazar Khaganate (Khazaria) north of the Caucasus.
653–654 Defeat of first Arab-Muslim invasion of Khazaria, but Muslims take Derbent.
655 Khazars conquer part of Crimean peninsula.
657–659 Fragmentation of the Turkic Khaganate.
***c*. 660** Migration of some Bulgar tribes from the western steppes, across the Danube into what became Bulgaria.
684 & 711 Khazars invade Muslim territory south of Caucasus and take Derbent.
713 Muslims recapture Derbent and raid deep into Khazaria.
721 Muslims invade Khazaria and take the Khazar capital at Balanjar.

723–724 Further campaigns by Muslims against Khazars and probably also Alans; a major Khazar assault is defeated between the Araxes and Kura rivers in February 724.

***c*. 730** Traditionally, the date when the Khazar Khagan Bulan converts to Judaism.

730–731 Khazars defeat an Arab-Muslim army at the battle of Marj Ardabil (9 December 730), overrun north-western Iran, and reportedly reach northern Iraq before being expelled.

732 Marriage of Byzantine Prince Constantine Copronimus (later Emperor Constantine V) to Tzitzak (baptized as Irene), daughter of the Khazar Khagan Bihar. Marwan ibn Muhammad (subsequently the last Umayyad caliph) counterattacks against Khazars, retaking Derbent and seizing Balanjar.

735 Marwan again invades Khazaria and defeats Khazar army.

737 Khazar Khagan supposedly accepts Islam temporarily as part of a peace agreement with the Caliphate.

***c*. 740** Khazar ruling elite and perhaps other dominant elements start converting to Judaism.

750 Umayyad caliphal dynasty, with powerbase in Syria, is replaced by Abbasid caliphal dynasty with powerbase in Iraq.

799–809 Reforms of Khagan Obadiah, and official adoption of Judaism by Khazar ruling clans.

810–812 Uprising of Kabarians (Khavars) – Khazar tribes who subsequently joined the Magyars.

822–836 Internal strife in Khazar Khaganate causes some Magyar tribes and three Kabarian Khazar sub-tribes to migrate to ‘Etelköz’ between Carpathian mountains and Dnieper river.

834 Construction of a fortified Khazar urban centre at Sarkel, controlling strategic portage between Don and Volga rivers.

882–885 Varangian Rus take Kiev and absorb several Eastern Slav tribes.

889–890 Turkic Pecheneg tribes, having migrated to the western steppes, attack the western Magyars; the Gyula (military commander) Arpad becomes ruler of Magyar Hungarians before 895.

894–895 Magyar Hungarians campaign on the Danube; defeated by Pechenegs, they abandon Etelköz and cross the Carpathians into Transylvania.

909 Varangian Rus raid Khazar territory and plunder Caspian coast.
913–914 Pecheneg and Ghuzz Turks and Alans attack the Khazars. A permitted Varangian raid down the Volga reaches the Caspian Sea, attacking Baku and northern Iran, but is attacked by Khazar troops on its return.
915 Pecheneg Turks make peace with Prince Igor of Kievan Rus (Russia).
922 Arab scholar Ibn Fadlan travels through Volga region.
932 War between Khazars and Alans ends in Khazar victory.
941 Failure of Kievan Rus assault upon Byzantine Empire by land and sea.
943 Rus raid Muslim territories in south Caspian region.
945 Peace agreement between Kievan Rus, Bulgaria and Byzantine Empire.
954–961 Correspondence between Hazdai ibn Shafrut (Shaprut), Jewish senior secretary of the Caliph of Cordoba (Spain and Portugal), and the Khazar Khagan or Beg (military commander) Joseph Ben Aaron.
965 Grand Prince Svyatoslav Igorevich I of Kievan Rus conquers Khazar Sarkel and Tamatarkha (Tmutarakan).
968 or 969 Svyatoslav Igorevich captures Khazar capital of Atil, effectively bringing the Khazar Khaganate to an end.
977–985 Atil occupied by *Khwarazmshahs* (Muslim rulers of Khwarazm, south of Aral Sea), followed by gradual conversion of most Khazars to Islam.
985 Grand Prince Vladimir Svyatoslavich of Kievan Rus campaigns down Volga River against now fragmented Khazars.
1048 Muslim scholar al-Biruni describes Atil as being in ruins.
1079 Prince Oleg Svyatoslavich, exiled ruler of Chernigov, is seized by Khazar ruler of Tmutarakan and sent as prisoner to Byzantine emperor.
1083 Oleg Svyatoslavich returns to Tmutarakan and declares himself *Archon* (Byzantine governor).

Khazar rulers

Kozar (undated) Traditionally, the ancestor of the Khazar people.

Karadach (**c. AD 450**) King of the Akatziroi, according to Priscus a steppe people allied to the Huns.

(*From* **mid-5th to early 7th centuries AD**, *tribal leaders are unknown*.)

Ziebal (**618–630**) Perhaps the same as Tong Yabghu, ruler of the Western Turkic Khaganate.

Bori Shad (**630–650**) Probable leader of tribes north-west of the Caucasus, under Western Turkic rule.

Irbis (**c. 650**) Recorded in traditional Russian sources as founder of the Khazar Khaganate.

Khalga (**mid-660s**) Mentioned only in the 17th-century Tatar *Cagfar Tarixi*.

Kaban (**late 660s**) Mentioned only in the 17th-century Tatar *Cagfar Tarixi*.

Busir (**c. 690–715**) The first confirmed, dateable Khazar Khagan.

Barjik (**late 720s–731**) Described as ‘the son of the Khagan’, who led Khazar armies against the Islamic Caliphate.

Bihar (**c. 732**) An ally of the Byzantine Empire.

Prisbit (**late 730s**) A female name – perhaps a regent rather than a ruler?

(**737–c. 740**: *Khazaria under the authority of the Muslim Umayyad Caliphate*.)

Baghatur (**c. 760**) Perhaps ruler of Khazaria, although Ras Tarkhan is also mentioned as ruler or military commander.

Khan Tuvan (**c. 825–830**) Also known as Dyggvi.

Tarkhan (**840s**) Also the title of the Khazar military commander.

Zachariah (**c. 861**) Mentioned only in a Russian source.

Bulan Gabriel (**c. 740**) Khagan or Beg who led the conversion of the Khazar ruling elite to Judaism; he and subsequent Khazar rulers until Aaron II are only mentioned in the correspondence of Hasdai ibn Shaprut.

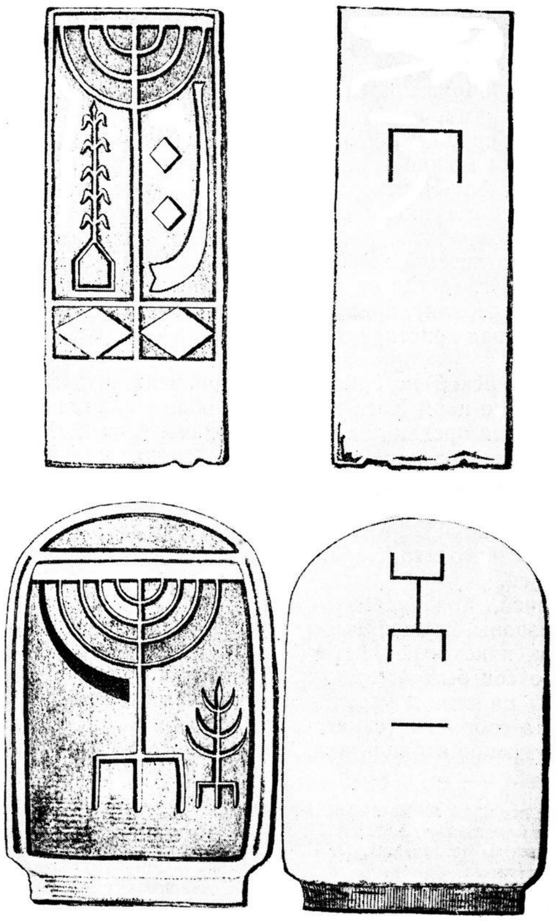
Obadiah (**c. 786–809**) Khagan or Beg, described as ‘one of the sons of the sons of Bulan’.

Hezekia (**mid-9th century**) Khagan or Beg, son of Obadiah.

Manasseh I (**mid- to late 9th century**) Khagan or Beg, son of Hezekia.

Hanukkah (**mid- to late 9th century**) Khagan or Beg, son of Obadiah.

Isaac (**mid- to late 9th century**) Khagan or Beg, son of Hanukkah.
Zebulun (**late 9th century**) Khagan or Beg, son of Isaac.
Manasseh II (**late 9th century**) Sometimes called Moshe; Khagan or Beg, son of Zebulun.
Nisi (**late 9th century**) Khagan or Beg, son of Manasseh II.
Aaron I (**late 9th or early 10th century**) Khagan or Beg, son of Nisi.
Menahem (**late 9th or early 10th century**) Khagan or Beg, son of Aaron I.
Benjamin (**late 9th or early 10th century**) Khagan or Beg, son of Menahem.
Aaron II (**920s–939 or 940**) Khagan or Beg, son of Benjamin.
Joseph (**939 or 940–965**) Khagan or Beg, son of Aaron; corresponded with Hasdai ibn Shaprut of Cordoba, and probably ruled during the collapse of the Khazar Khaganate.
David (**c. 986–988**) Probable ruler of a small Khazar successor-state on the Taman peninsula that was apparently called Tmutarakan.
Georgius Tzul (unknown until **1016**) Ruler of Kerch, in Tmutarakan on the Taman peninsula; perhaps converted to Orthodox Christianity.



Khazar carved stone slabs with various motifs, including Jewish seven- and nine-branched *menora* candelabra, and perhaps (top left) a *shofar* ram’s-horn trumpet. (Archive of M Zhirohov)

CAMPAIGNS AND BATTLES

ARAB-KHAZAR WARS, 7th–8th CENTURIES

Emergence of Derbent frontier zone, AD 642–692

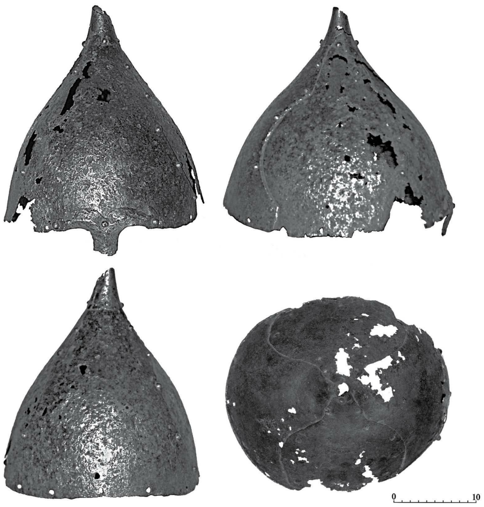
The first wave of Muslim Arab conquests rapidly thrust aside the armies of both the Byzantine and Sassanian empires to reach areas immediately south of the Caucasus, and in 640 Arab forces invaded Armenia. Nearby, the Khazars had dominated Azerbaijan since 632, so the sudden approach of the victorious Arabs caused them to seek allies. The first recorded clash between Muslims and Khazars was in 642, when Arab raiders reached Derbent at the narrowest point between the Caucasus mountains and the Caspian coast. The following year the Muslims pushed beyond Derbent, towards the Khazars' then-capital at Balanjar; meanwhile, in Armenia, in 645–646 the Caliph's army defeated a Byzantine force which included both Khazar and Alan allies. Seven years later a Muslim army of conquest complete with siege engines attacked Balanjar, but in the resulting battle the Khazars reportedly also used siege weapons and *ballistas*, killing the Muslim commander and driving back his army.

Turmoil within the Islamic world now enabled several frontier areas to regain virtual independence, including Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. However, the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate in 661 resulted in the creation of a huge, stable, remarkably efficient and militarily effective state centred in Syria. Although the Islamic conquests resumed, the Khazars also remained powerful and expansionist, striking south of the Caucasus in 684. This was apparently in response to the actions of Alp, the Christian *Ilutuer* or vassal ruler of the Khuni people of the northern Caucasus (who may themselves have been a relic of the Hun Empire which had collapsed more than two centuries earlier). Alp's raiding of Khazar territory provoked retaliation which devastated several areas and killed several local rulers; the Khazars also levied a heavy tribute.

Much of Armenia was nevertheless now under Muslim suzerainty, and in 692 the caliph's governor, Muhammed ibn Marwan, retook Derbent and tried to establish a strong frontier zone against future Khazar aggression. This strategic region changed hands several times, while both sides also watched with interest the political turmoil in the Byzantine Empire. In 713, Habib ibn Maslama forced back an invading Khazar army with difficulty, but then regained Derbent after a three-month siege – though only when a local citizen betrayed a subterranean passage into the fortress. Believing Derbent to be indefensible with his available forces, Habib ordered its fortifications razed before pushing north deeper into Khazar territory. He reached Samander (now Tarku), where the Khazar army made a stand. For several days champions from each side duelled in the space between the two armies before Habib, recognizing his numerical inferiority, abandoned his baggage train, and led his army back to Georgia while the Khazars were preoccupied with looting the Muslims' abandoned camp.

Khazar successes and failures, AD 721–764

In 721 the Khazars took the offensive, invading Armenia and destroying Muslim garrisons. This was followed by 15 years of warfare, during which the Caliphate's still largely Arab forces were often greatly outnumbered but generally more sophisticated. They were superior in technology, tactics, and political strategy (for example, attempting to win over local inhabitants while expelling Khazar garrisons). On one occasion the Muslim commander Jarrah ibn Abdallah took Samandar, then turned south again towards Balanjar. In an attempt to bar his passage the Khazar garrison used an old form of field fortification long traditional amongst steppe nomads, constructing a camp surrounded by wagons and carts tied together. However, Muslim soldiers advanced to this perimeter under the cover of arrows (probably shot by Arab infantry), cut the ropes and broke through the Khazars' barrier. After brutal hand-to-hand combat, the 'prince' (governor) of Balanjar and 50 of his men escaped, while leaving the Khazar leader's family to be captured. Jarrah ibn Abdallah now sent another senior captive after the Khazar commander, promising that he could continue ruling Balanjar under Muslim suzerainty. Following this successful campaign, in which both Balanjar and Samandar cities were left intact in return for payment of tribute, each Arab cavalryman was rewarded with 300 *dinars* from the booty, while infantrymen got 100 each; one-fifth of the total loot was also set aside for the caliph's government. Jarrah wanted to continue the campaign but, with cold weather approaching, and having been warned that another Khazar army was assembling, he took his troops back to winter quarters in Azerbaijan. As so often happened in this part of the world, 'General Winter' had intervened to force back an invader.

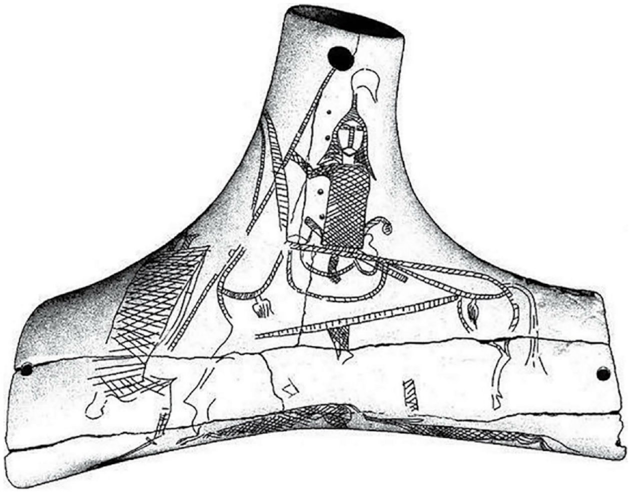


Four views of a helmet found near the river Oskol in eastern Ukraine, including its interior; probably Khazar 10th century (Klim Zhukov via Adam Kubik)

In 730, encouraged by recent successes, the Khazars invaded Islamic territory. They were commanded by Barjik, whom Arab chroniclers described as 'son of the Khagan', though he may already have been the ruler. Bursting into Azerbaijan, he ordered his troops to slaughter Muslims wherever they were found, and led the main Khazar force towards Ardebil. Here, outside the city walls, the veteran Jarrah ibn Abdallah was defeated and slain; Ardebil then fell, after which Khazars spread across the country to loot and pillage. However, Said ibn Amr al-Harashi was now in command of Muslim forces, and, perhaps having learned from previous failures, he began to destroy the scattered Khazar detachments one by one. Eventually the two main armies came together on the Mugan steppe of north-western Iran. The Arabs were victorious; they overran the Khazar camp, regained lost booty, and almost captured Barjik himself.

Thereafter the war ground on with successes and failures on both sides, until a new Muslim commander, Maslama, decided that strategically vital Derbent must never be lost again. He strengthened its fortifications, established a military arsenal, and brought in a colony of Syrian troops with their families to garrison the citadel. Confident that no more could be done, Maslama handed over command to Marwan ibn Muhammad, a cousin of the caliph (who would later himself become the last Umayyad Caliph of Damascus as Marwan II). In 735, when Marwan offered to make peace, the Khagan sent an ambassador, but negotations turned sour. The Khazar ambassador was seized, and Marwan assembled an army reputedly numbering 150,000 men, including an Armenian detachment led by Prince Ashot. The size of this army enabled Marwan to divide his forces and invade Khazaria by two different routes.

Once he was deep inside Khazar territory, Marwan released the captive ambassador and sent him to the Khagan. The Khazar ruler fell back to a place the Arab chroniclers called al-Baida ('the White'), which was probably part of the new Khazar capital of Atil. There he left an army, while he raised troops from regions of the Khaganate which had been untouched by the Islamic invasions. Instead of besieging al-Baida, Marwan led his army inland up the right bank of the Volga, eventually ravaging the distant lands of the Burtas, subjects of the Khazars on the northern frontier of the Khaganate. By now the Khagan had returned to shadow the Muslim army from the left bank of the Volga. So Marwan crossed the mighty river by night, using a pontoon bridge or bridges, probably where the river was divided by one or more islands – a remarkable feat of military engineering for the 8th century. A group of Arab scouts then killed a Khazar commander in a skirmish, after which Marwan's army surprised the main Khazar force encamped. The Khazar *Tarkhan* or senior commander was killed during bitter fighting in which 7,000 Khazar soldiers were reportedly slain, with some 10,000 captured. The Khagan now sued for peace, but Marwan demanded that he convert to Islam. The Khazar leader agreed and – briefly – did become a Muslim, while also moving his capital to less vulnerable Atil on the Volga Delta.



A bone reliquary from the Don region, carved with a depiction of a Khazar warrior on horseback, *c.* 7th century. Discernible details include a plumed helmet with an aventail; an armoured cuirass; a long lance, a sabre, and the end of a cased bow; and pendant ornaments on the horse's breast and crupper straps. (Archive of M Zhirohov)

Marwan ibn Muhammad's remarkable campaign seemed to mark the triumph of Islam on this front. However, the Umayyad Caliphate was facing serious difficulties closer to home. Marwan ruled as the last Umayyad caliph from 744 to 750, but was then killed and his regime replaced by the new Abbasid Caliphate centred in Iraq. This tumult in the Islamic heartlands enabled the Khazars to rebuild their power, and in 764 a Khazar commander known as Ras Tarkhan invaded Azerbaijan and eastern Georgia within what was now the Abbasid Empire.

Thereafter relations between Khazar Khagans and Abbasid Caliphs remained stable and, after a century of intermittent warfare, the struggle seemed to have ended in a draw. Nevertheless, the Khazar Khaganate had halted the spread of Islam into South-Eastern Europe, providing time and space for Russia to become Christian. The Khaganate had also sometimes served as a valuable strategic ally of the Byzantine Empire during its struggle for survival.

BYZANTINE-KHAZAR WARS, 8th–10th CENTURIES

Abkhazia and Crimea, AD 760s–early 800s

Despite facing a common foe in the Umayyad and subsequently Abbasid Caliphates, the Khazar Khaganate and Byzantine Empire had their own disputes. One episode saw the Khazars supporting King Leon II of Abkhazia (767–768 and 811–812), whose mother was a daughter of the Khazar Khagan, in a successful bid to free himself from Byzantine overlordship and apparently exchange it for Khazar suzerainty.

A more important arena of rivalry was the Crimean peninsula, which, although inhabited by Christians, was largely under Khazar rule. Tensions became acute in 787 when an uprising broke out in Gothia, a Goth principality in south-western Crimea. This relic of earlier Germanic rule was under Khazar suzerainty, and a local Christian bishop named John put himself at the head of the rebellion. A Khazar garrison was expelled from the regional capital of Doros (now Mangup), and the rebels seized control of mountain passes controlling access to the coast. Unwilling to accept this situation, the Khazar Khagan speedily regained Doros, capturing but not executing Bishop John. Since the Khaganate was then a powerful state, the Byzantines who controlled part of the Crimean coast chose not to intervene immediately.

At the start of the 9th century Byzantium took advantage of a civil war in Khazaria between the Khazars and their Magyar vassals, and overran Crimean Gothia apparently with almost no resistance – perhaps one of the competing forces within the Khaganate wanted Byzantine support. What seems certain is that Khagan Obadiah was so preoccupied with problems at home that he let Gothia go.

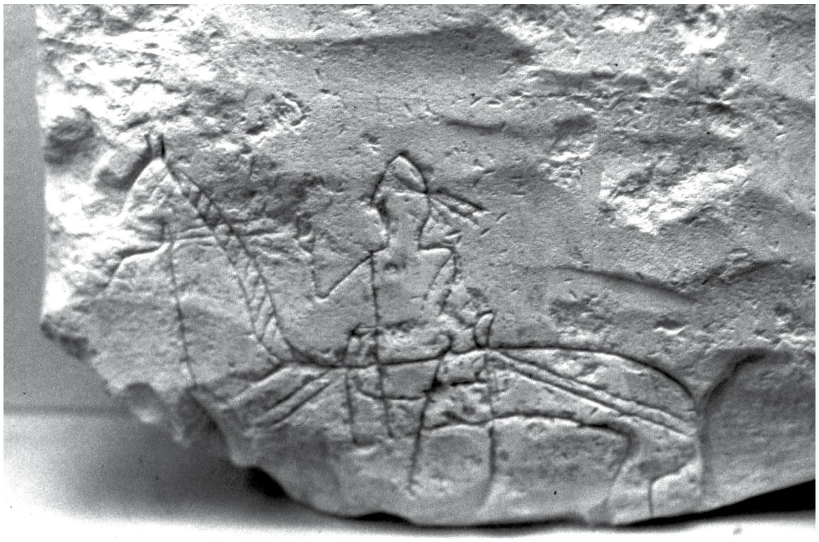
Campaigns also involving the Alans, c. AD 900–932

It may have been during the reign of the Khagan Benjamin, in the first years of the 10th century, that the Byzantine Empire took the offensive against Khazaria. For this enterprise the Byzantines found allies amongst other peoples who had quarrels with the Khazars, including the Burtas, Magyars, Central Asian Turks, Ghuzz, Black Bulgars, Pechenegs and perhaps Ossetians. Acting in concert, this loose alliance put the Khazars under huge military pressure, while the Khaganate’s only effective allies seem to have been the Alans. Nevertheless, this first major Khazar-Byzantine war ended in Khazar victory.

The Khagan Aaron II (920s–940) also faced conflict with the Byzantine Empire when, encouraged by the latter, the Alans turned against their erstwhile Khazar allies. By this time the Alans had largely been driven from the north Caucasus plains into the mountains, but they nevertheless remained a formidable force, capable (according to the near-contemporary Muslim chronicler al-Mas'udi) of fielding 30,000 horsemen. In response to their attacks Aaron allied with '*Twrqy*' or Turks, perhaps meaning the Ghuzz. The Alans were defeated and their ruler captured; Aaron not only treated his prisoner with respect, but married his son Joseph, a future Khagan, to the captured ruler's daughter – the traditional method for cementing an alliance. The Alans are also said to have abandoned their recently accepted Othodox Christian religion in 932, expelling the Byzantine bishop; some Alans now converted to Judaism, though most soon returned to the Orthodox fold.

Campaigns also involving the Rus, AD 939–965

The Varangian founders of the Kievan Rus state were Scandinavians, largely from Sweden, who had subdued many Slav tribes. The early Varangian aristocracy had followed the example of these peoples in paying tribute to the Khazars, and had even fought for them against the Khaganate's enemies around the southern Caspian Sea. However, tension between the Rus and Khazars erupted into violence after 914, when Rus returning to the Volga from a Caspian campaign were attacked by the Khazar army's elite Muslim mercenaries, the Arsiya, and also by Burtas and Volga Bulgar vassals of the Khaganate (see also below, 'Russian-Khazarian Wars').



Khazar graffito of a horseman; the helmet may perhaps be intended to show a nasal bar and a flying plume or streamers. (Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg; photograph David Nicolle)

There was significant persecution of Jewish minorities in the Byzantine Empire under Emperor Romanos I (920–944), along with a generally anti-Khazar policy. In response the Jewish Khagan Joseph turned against the many Christians living in Khazaria, and in 939 this resulted in a war during which the Rus sided with the Byzantines. The so-called ‘Helga, king of the Rus’ (either Oleg or Igor of Kiev) suddenly seized the Khazar fortress of Samkertz on the Taman pensinula, overlooking the Kerch straits between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. One account claims that no Khazar chief (*hapaqid* or *reb hashmonaya*) or garrison was installed there at the time. Another version states that when Samkertz’s garrison commander or governor (*bulshitsi*), named Pesakh, heard the news he quickly retook this strongpoint. Yet a third version describes Pesakh as the Khazar *archon* (a Byzantine term for governor) of the Bosphorus, meaning the southern coastal region of the Sea of Azov. According to this account, Pesakh crossed from the Taman peninsula to Crimea, capturing three Byzantine towns and numerous villages before besieging Kherson, which he forced to pay tribute. Having defeated Byzantine forces in the Crimean peninsula Pesakh attacked the Rus in a four-month campaign, regained booty from Samkertz, and defeated ‘Helga’, who now agreed to join forces with the Khazars.

In 941 a large joint Rus and Khazar fleet attacked the imperial capital, Constantinople. This assault, well recorded in Byzantine sources, saw the Rus-Khazar fleet rampaging around the Sea of Marmara and the Black and Aegean Seas. Eventually the Byzantine navy managed to defeat their foes with the aid of their legendary ‘Greek fire’ weapon, after which the Khazars and Rus were also defeated on land.

Despite this failure, ‘Helga’ remained an ally of the Khazars, and in 943 the Khagan sent him to conquer what is now Azerbaijan. The primary target of this enterprise, which served mainly Khazar rather than Rus interests, was a frontier zone of the Islamic Caliphate beyond the vital fortress of Derbent, which the Arabs called ‘the Gate of Gates’. According to Gregory Bar Hebraeus, writing in the 13th century, other Khazar vassals also took part, including Lezgins and Alans from the Caucasus in addition to the usual vassal Slavs.

The subordination of Kievan Rus to the Khazars which had been achieved by Pesakh’s campaign proved relatively short-lived. By the 950s and 960s the Khagan Joseph was again at war with the Rus, to deny them access to the Caspian Sea. His efforts failed; the Rus formed an alliance with the Turkish Ghuzz, and in 964–965 Prince Svyatoslav Igorevich defeated the Khazar Khaganate. Whether the Byzantines also took part in this campaign is unknown, but in 1016 Byzantium and Rus jointly suppressed a rebellion in Crimea by George Tsulo – the *strategikon* of Kherson, who was of Khazar origin. However, this was not a war against Jewish Khazaria, which no longer existed; George Tsulo was himself a Christian.

RUSSIAN-KHAZARIAN WARS, 10th CENTURY

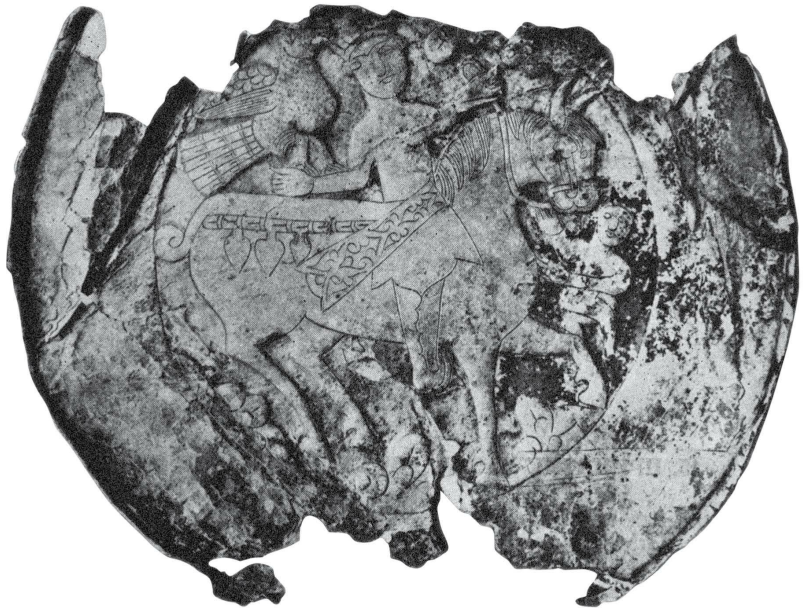
An ancient Russian chronicle called *The Story of Previous Times* states that, after the deaths of the legendary founders of Kiev – the Slav brothers Kyi, Shchek and Khoryv, and their sister Lybid – until 852 the local Slav tribe continued to pay tribute to the Khazars in the form of swords. The historian L.N. Gumilev points out that a tribute of swords was merely the disarming of a people defeated in war by the Khazars, whereas other tribute in furs and silver were valuable trading items. The Varangians who subsequently dominated these Slav tribes similarly demanded such tribute.

Gumilev maintains that it was this diversion of Slav tribute from the Khazars to the newly arrived Scandinavians that led to war between the Khazars and the Varangian Rus, in which the Varangians initially came off worse. However, most experts suggest that a mutually beneficial trade arrangement was concluded between the Rus and Khazars, with Varangian raiders either purchasing or capturing Slavs and Finns to be sold as slaves in Khazaria, most of them destined for ultimate resale in the Byzantine Empire or Islamic territories.

Meanwhile, longer-distance trade, especially in slaves, was virtually monopolized by the Radhonites (Hebrew *Radhani,* Arabic *Radaniyya*) – Jewish merchants who operated across much of Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa from the 6th to 10th centuries AD. What influence Radhonite merchants and their trade might have had on the decision of the Khazar ruling elite to convert to Judaism after about 730 is unknown.

An alliance with the Varangians proved more profitable for the Khazars than exacting tribute directly from the Slav tribes. Furthermore, the Khazar rulers persuaded the fearsome Varangians to take part in campaigns against the peoples of the southern Caspian, whence the main Islamic threat to the Khaganate originated. During the late 9th and early 10th centuries such raids could prove highly profitable for both participants when, as described by the Muslim chronicler al-Mas'udi, they shared the booty. This relationship often sounds like one between equal allies, or perhaps just between mercenaries and those who hired them.

The first significant war between the Varangian Rus and Khazaria took place around 913–914 when, again according to al-Mas'udi, a Rus fleet of some 500 ships, each containing 40–100 warriors, appeared in the Kerch Strait. There they asked the Khazar authorities for permission to sail up the Don, to travel across the famous portage near today's Volgograd (ex-Stalingrad), then down the Volga to the Caspian, and permission was granted in return for an eventual share of their anticipated booty. The Rus entered the Caspian and raided various Muslim territories, including Gilan, Dailam, Tabaristan, Abaskun, Arran and Shirvan, before returning to the Volga Delta, where the Khazar ruler was given his share of the loot.



Magyar or Khazar silver plate, 9th–10th centuries, showing a mounted warrior. Under magnification, certain elements are seen to be rendered in careful detail: (centre) a highly decorated quiver, shaped to carry arrows points-up, and a riding boot cut with a wavy edge down the front; and (top left), a section of lamellar armour. The crupper strap of the harness shows metal plates and ivy-leaf pendants. (Archive of M Zhirohov)

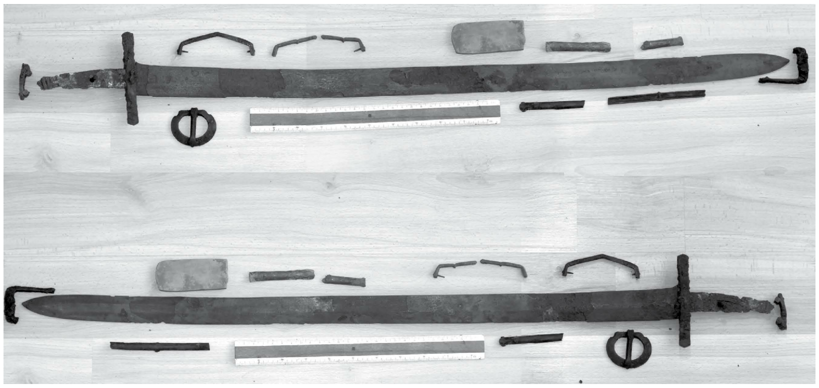
Thereupon, however, the Khagan's elite guard force of Muslim mercenaries, the Arsiya (see below, under 'Armies of the Khaganate'), supposedly demanded revenge for their co-religionists slaughtered by the Rus raiders; it is likely that some Arsiya came from those regions which had been attacked. Being unable to hold back these enraged warriors, who formed a significant part of his army, the Khagan merely warned the Rus. The resulting battle lasted three days, after which some 5,000 Varangian Rus fled to their ships and sailed up the Volga. However, when they reached the territory of the Burtas and Volga Bulgars they were almost wiped out by local forces who were themselves subjects of the Khazar Khaganate.

However, al-Mas'udi's account is inconsistent, and the chronicler probably exaggerates the 'mutinous' aspect of the Arsiya's behaviour; it seems more likely that the attack on the Rus raiders was pre-planned after a decision by the Khagan himself. Elsewhere, Gumilev writes that 'the campaigns of the Rus to Gilan and to Azerbaijan were accomplished thanks to the support of the Judeo-Khazar government, which supplied the fleet with pilots and suitable ships'. According to Gumilev, the Khazar ruler had actually sent the Rus fleet against the Dailamites, a warlike Shia Muslim people of the south

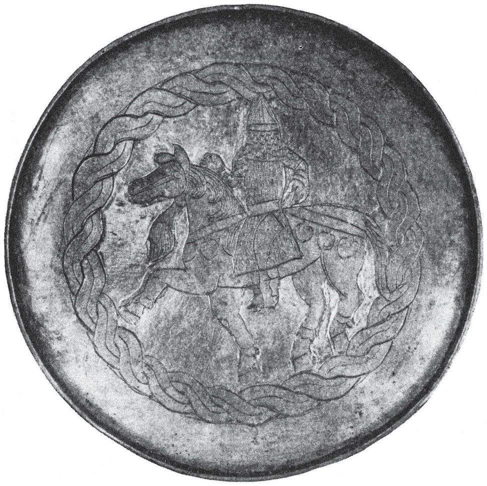
Caspian mountains who were playing an increasingly disruptive role in the turbulent politics of that region. Gumilev suggests that this Rus campaign may have been intended by the Khagan to punish the Dailamites for blocking the lucrative trade route between Khazaria and the heartlands of the Caliphate. However, the Rus raiders also attacked neighbouring Azerbaijan and parts of Armenia with which the Khazars perhaps had amicable trade agreements, thus ruining the Khagan's strategic plans. Perhaps the Rus incurred the wrath of the Khagan simply by ignoring his instructions as to who they were to attack, and who to leave alone.

Gumilev is wrong in his suggestion that the Sunni Muslim Abbasid Caliphate was an ally of the Khazars. Islam was still a threat to the Khaganate, which would not allow Muslim scholars to carry Islam to the Volga Bulgars whose territory lay north of Khazaria. So why might the Khagan have decided to destroy the Rus army? Perhaps he thought that war was inevitable, and so decided to strike first, while also gaining some short-term benefit from portraying Khazaria as a defender of Muslims.

Only in the last years of the Khagan Aaron II's reign did the Khazars' mixture of cunning diplomacy and military force fail them. In 939 (see above, under 'Campaigns also involving the Rus, AD 939–965') the Rus saw an opportunity to avenge the disaster of 913–914 and, in alliance with the Byzantines, a Rus army struck at Khazaria just as a new ruler had either come to power or was about to do so – Joseph, the last effective Khagan.


Both sides of an undecorated Khazar sabre and its scabbard. (Private collection; photograph Mikhail Zhirohov)

Later, during the 950s, Joseph's wide-ranging efforts to find allies would result in a correspondence between himself and Hasdai ibn Shaprut (Shafrut), a Jewish senior official in the government of the Umayyad caliph of the western Islamic state of al-Andalus (Islamic Spain and Portugal). This remarkable man, born in Jaen in southern Spain, was a physician, diplomat, and patron of science who wrote in Latin as well as Hebrew and Arabic. Though not a government minister, Hasdai negotiated alliances with sometimes distant powers on behalf of the Caliph of Andalusia, as well as being responsible for the collection of customs dues in Cordoba's port. In 949 Hasdai had sent an embassy to the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, where it may have contacted Khazar officials or merchants. One way or another, a correspondence developed between Hasdai and Khagan Joseph, part of which survives embedded in other rare medieval Hebrew documents. In one of these Hasdai noted that Joseph was waging a 'persistent war' against the Rus, barring them from reaching Derbent overland or by sea. If the Rus had reached this point, Hasdai maintained, then they could have threatened the great Islamic city of Baghdad itself.



Khazar or Turkic engraved silver plate showing a horseman. Under magnification, he can be seen to wear a pointed helmet of segmental construction with a mail aventail across his face, and lamellar armour reaching down to his knees. His horse's harness is ornamented with a horsetail throat tassel, and circular pendants from the crupper strap. (Archive of M Zhirohov)

In practice, Khazar suzerainty over the Rus may have ended by 944, when the Rus agreed a new treaty with the Byzantine Empire. Just over 20 years later Svyatoslav I Igorevich, the ruler of Kievan Rus, launched a decisive campaign against Khazaria which destroyed the Khaganate. This time the Rus acted in concert with Ghuzz Turks, and possibly again with Byzantines. As a result, Tamatarkha (Tmutarakan) at the entrance to the Sea of Azov, as well as the major Khazar fortress of Sarkel, became part of Kievan Rus.

Shortly afterwards Khazar lands along the lower Volga passed under the rule of Khwarazm, and were steadily Islamized. Around 985, Vladimir I of Kiev launched another sudden campaign against what was left of Khazaria, forcing the survivors to pay tribute. The Khazar Khaganate was finally dead.

PECHENEG-KHAZAR WARS, 9th–10th CENTURIES

The nomadic Pechenegs of the steppes had posed yet another threat to the Khazar Khaganate. Byzantine chroniclers maintain that there was almost constant hostility between the Khazars and these fellow Turks. (The Muslim chronicler al-Mas'udi states that Khazars and Pechenegs usually lived in peace, but since he wrote that the Pechenegs lived to the west of the Khazars he was probably confusing them with the Magyar Hungarians.)

Towards the close of the 9th century a local Khazar leader tried to block the Pechenegs' migration, and formed an alliance with the Ghuzz Turks who lived south of the Ural Mountains. This resulted in a joint Khazar-Ghuzz army defeating the Pechenegs in 889, and forcing most of them to flee westward to the Black Sea steppes. In their place the Ghuzz took over the southern steppes of the Khazar realm, seemingly invited there by the Khazars.

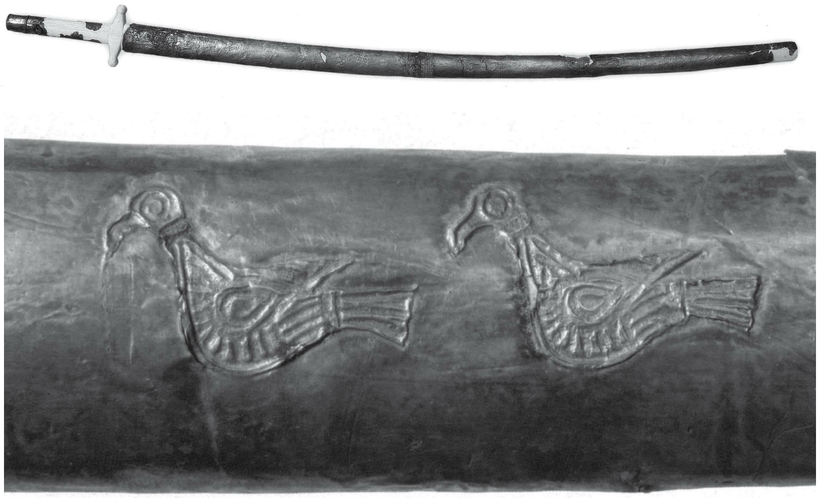
As the Pechenegs moved westward they clashed with the Magyars who were, in turn, obliged to leave 'Levedia' (probably on the Don River) and migrate to Etelköz (Atelkuz), a territory between the Dneiper river and the Carpathian mountains. The Pechenegs also allied with the Balkan (as distinct from Volga) Bulgarian Tsar Simeon, who invaded Atelkuz in 895, slaughtering any Magyars he could find.

Thus, by the mid-10th century, the western steppes were occupied by nomadic Pechenegs who were nominally subject to the Khazar Khaganate. In reality, however, this Pecheneg migration had not only disrupted northern Khazaria, but also several Greek-speaking coastal settlements on the northern Black Sea (including the city of Phanagoria on the Taman pensinsula), several of which were abandoned. Furthermore, Pechenegs reportedly destroyed Bulgarian-Khazar settlements on the Crimean steppe. Ultimately the Pechenegs were among the main beneficiaries of the final collapse of the Khazar Khaganate, with domination of the steppes west of the River Volga passing to them after the 960s.

ARMIES OF THE KHAGANATE

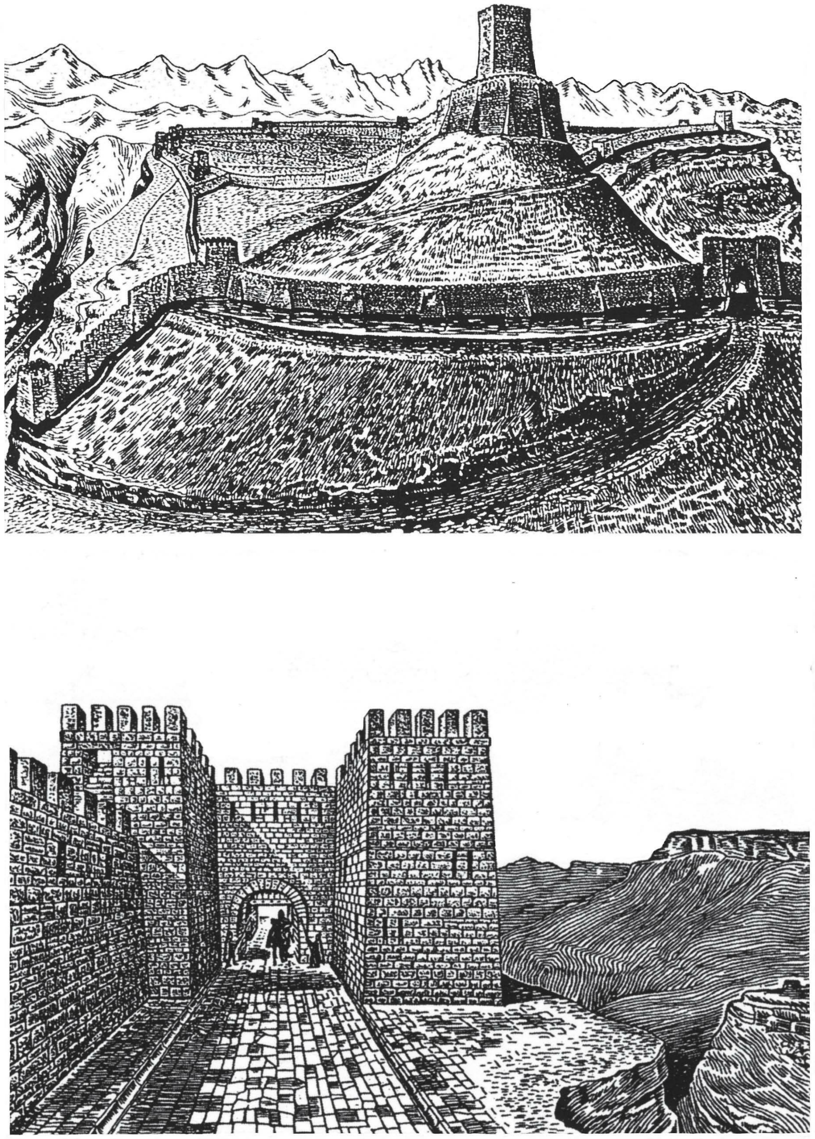
Character, strengths and organization

The main part of the Khazar army is thought to have consisted of lightly armed cavalry, though a different picture is provided by archaeological finds and images of elite Khazar warriors. Nevertheless, this assessment may have been substantially true until the beginning of the 8th century, after which heavily armed soldiers who could fight both on horseback and on foot became increasingly important. Such troops also defended the walls of fortresses where, it seems, they came to play a dominant role. Whatever the number and proportion of heavy armoured cavalry in the Khazar army, it was they who normally decided the outcome of a battle, as the primary offensive arm tasked with breaking apart enemy formations. It is equally clear that the full arms and armour of such Khazar armoured shock cavalry must have been very expensive. It is unknown how men acquired such equipment at a time when full armour and top-quality weapons were proportionately much costlier, and rarer, than they would become in the later medieval period.



A Khazer-period sabre and its scabbard from the Caucasus, 10th century, and a close-up of a decorative element from just above the latter’s deep chape. (Furusiyah Art Foundation, inv. RB-136)

While that question remains unanswered, written sources do shed light on the numbers and organization of the Khazar forces. They indicate that during the first phase, from the 7th to the mid-8th century, the army was entirely mounted, and consisted of two elements. The first was drawn from the *Tarkhans* or tribal nobility of Khazar tribes, many if not most of whom had either lamellar or mail armour or both. The second part of the Khazar army consisted of lightly armed ordinary Khazar tribesmen. All were under the direct command of the Khagan or his *Shad* or deputy – often one of his sons or nephews. Individual units were commanded by experienced and renowned Tarkhans.



Reconstructions of the Khazar-period fortress at Khoumara Karachay in the Cherkess Republic, Russia, and of its gate defences half way up the slope. (Archive of M Zhirohov)

Tarkhans also formed a bodyguard for the ruler, and this could be formidable even though its numbers were not particularly large. In 630, for example, a 3,000-strong detachment under Chorpan Tarkhan was credited with defeating the 10,000-strong Sassanian Persian corps of Goghann. Writing in the early 10th century, the Arab historian Ahmad ibn Atham al-Kufi reported that there were 1,000 Khazar Tarkhans in Derbent in 708, while in 737 the Khazar commander fought with only 4,000 ‘children of the Tarkhans’ against the supposedly 120,000-strong largely Arab army of

Marwan ibn Muhammad. (Arab sources are unfortunately very unreliable when giving numbers of troops, e.g. in their claim that the Muslims were defeated by Khazar armies numbering 200,000 or 300,000.)

Following a coup at the end of the 8th century, the Khagan himself was removed from practical responsibility for state administration. This was taken over by a senior figure called the *Bek* or *Beg,* who already commanded the army. Nevertheless, the Khagan's military deputy remained the Shad, but quite who held this title during the 9th and 10th centuries is unclear. The core of the army remained the cavalry elite of Tarkhans. According to the 10th-century Persian scholar Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Istakhri, this still numbered 12,000, though later sources reduce this figure to 10,000. But, again according to al-Istakhri, the Khazar Khaganate had no standing army (unlike the main Islamic states of this period), and troops were only summoned to muster when needed.

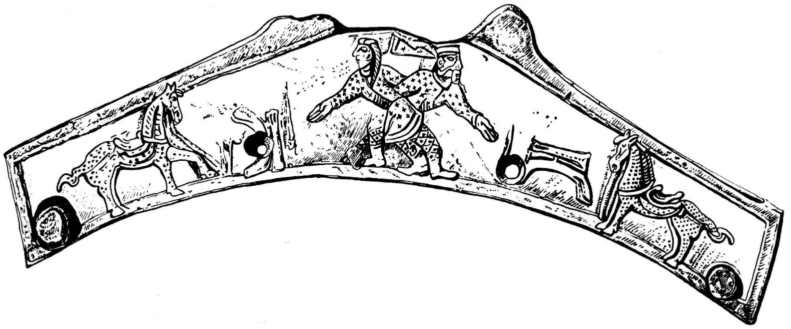
The 'feudal' core, mercenaries and vassals

Arab historians describing a perhaps late version of the Khazar army indicate that it now included full-time professionals who were regularly paid, and thus it may have consisted largely of mercenaries. The situation was eventually clarified by Ibn Ahmad ibn Rustah, a 10th-century Iranian traveller and geographer, who wrote that the ruler's deputy or *Isha* (the Shad) obliged prominent people to supply cavalrymen according to the size of their own territories or property. Furthermore, the Shad was now accompanied by, or could muster, 10,000 fully equipped horsemen with flags, spears and strong armour, maintained at his expense and recruited from among the wealthy elite. This sounds remarkably like an early version of medieval Europe's feudal military system. In practice the core of the Khazar army probably consisted of the personal retinues of the Bek and Shad, plus detachments of wealthy Tarkhans each accompanied by some followers and servants. In addition to this well-equipped elite there would be much larger numbers of tribal warriors, numbering up to 30,000 or 40,000; more rarely, larger numbers may have been raised from the settled peasantry and vassal peoples.

By the middle of the 10th century the Khaganate had shrunk, and many of the strictly Khazar population probably lived in and around the mercantile city of Atil, being no longer nomadic but engaged in agriculture and trade. It is also possible that most military duties had now been transferred to subject peoples and mercenaries. Written sources hint that the later Khagans' armies largely consisted of non-Khazars, and it is difficult to associate many later warrior burials with identifiable Khazars.

These sources often suggest that Alans played the major role in protecting the Khaganate's frontiers, but this was not entirely true. While Alan tribes were forcibly resettled in border areas facing Slav tribes, some northern Slavs like the Vyatichi and Radmichi also found themselves under Khazar domination until the end of the Khaganate. As such they did not pose a serious threat, and small frontier fortifications served merely as places of refuge in times of danger. It was only the rise of the Rus in the middle of the 9th century that posed a real threat, causing the Khazars to build a series of true frontier fortresses, but whether any of these were permanently garrisoned also remains unknown.

According to al-Mas'udi, the Khazar Khagans recruited around 7,000 mounted and armoured archers and spearmen from Muslim communities around the capital city, Atil, or from neighbouring Islamic lands, or perhaps from both. These formed the *Arsiya* (al-Arsiya), sometimes described by modern historians as Muslim mercenaries or a 'Khwarazmian guard'. In fact the contemporary sources do not call them mercenaries (in the usual sense of temporary hirelings), and they appear to have lived or been settled permanently around Atil. Nevertheless, most do appear to have been of Khwarazmian origin; al-Mas'udi maintains that their movement from Khwarazm, south of the Aral Sea, to the Volga Delta area was a result of hunger and plague. When this occurred is unknown, but it was no earlier than the end of the 8th century, by which time Khwarazm had been thoroughly Islamized. The supposedly 'heavy equipment' of such Arsiya may also have been no heavier than that of the best-equipped Khazar elite, but the Arsiya's combat effectiveness was undeniable.



Decoration on the rim of a Khazar silver dish showing men and horses; note that the saddles are shown without stirrups. (Archive of M Zhirohov)

Some Arab descriptions of the Khazar army refer to the Burtas from the north supposedly supplying the Khagan with 10,000 horsemen, but, in apparent contradiction, others state that the Burtas were so poor that ‘only the one who possesses great wealth owns a horse’. Furthermore, they were said to lack any armour. In fact archaeological evidence shows the Burtas to have been armed either with sabres like those of the partially Khazar Saltov-Mayaki culture between the Don and Dneiper rivers, or with straight swords, plus bows, axes, fighting knives, spears and javelins. The actual number of Burtas warriors remains unclear, but if this term encompassed all the Mordvin tribes (speaking a Finnish tongue), then figures given in Arab sources could be plausible.

The suggested number of 20,000 for allied or vassal troops from the Volga Bulgars appears more realistic, but when the same figure is given for the Magyars it is probably exaggerated. Like the Magyars, the Volga Bulgars had tried to escape Khazar domination in the early 10th century but, as Ibn Fadlan noted, they still had to obey the Khagan’s often unwelcome orders. By the mid-10th century, however, these Volga Bulgars had achieved almost complete independence. Detachments of Eastern Slavs similarly served the Khazar Khaganate as auxiliary infantry, but there is no reliable information about their numbers. Judging by finds of horse harness in the archaeological record, a minority of them probably fought as light cavalry.

Discipline was ferocious in the Khazar army, according to Ibn Fadlan (who was, of course, probably repeating what he had been told by the Khazars’ neighbours and rivals):

> No squadron [the Khagan] dispatches will turn back or retreat, no matter what happens. Those who come back after a defeat are killed. If his generals and the deputy are defeated, he has them brought into his presence, along with their women and childen, and gives the women and children to another man before their very eyes. He does the same with their horses, belongings, weapons, and residences. Sometimes he cuts them in two and gibbets them. Sometimes he hangs them by the neck from a tree. Sometimes he makes them into stable-hands – if he means to be kind to them, that is.[1]

To summarize, in its heyday the Khazar Khaganate could call upon armed forces numbering 80,000 to 100,000 people. Given the extent of Khazar territory at its zenith, and the size of its population including subordinate peoples, such a figure appears entirely realistic.

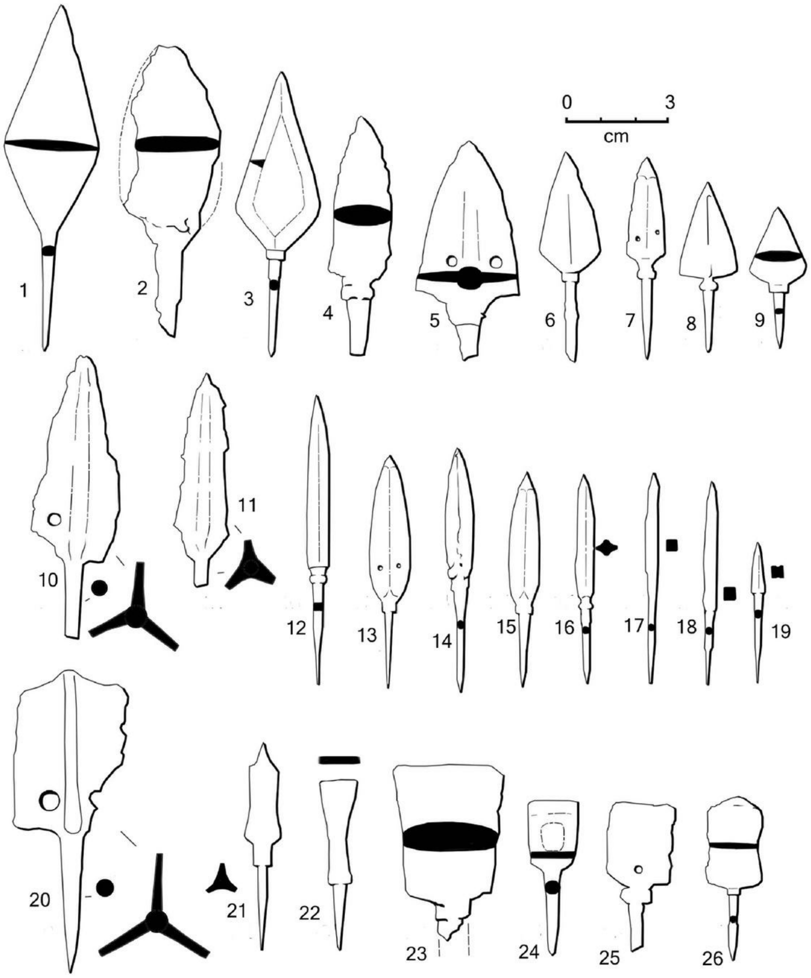
1 Ibn Fadlan, quoted by Yaqut (trans J. E. Montgomery), *Mission to the Volga* (New York, 2017) 52–53

ARMS AND ARMOUR

The armed forces of the Khazar Khaganate had a rich array of military equipment, including various types of helmet and armour, shields, and distance weapons such as bows. Close-combat weapons ranged from slightly curved single-edged sabres and straight double-edged swords, to daggers, spears, axes and war-flails. By *c.* AD 750 the Khazars already made use of a broader array of military gear than any other people in Eastern Europe.

Archaeological evidence also shows that there were variations in the styles used in different regions of the Khaganate. The most complete array is found in specifically Khazar burials, and includes mail and lamellar armour, helmet, sabre, large fighting knife or *khanjar*, smaller knife, war-flail, axe, spear and bow. This was clearly the equipment of a mounted warrior, and it was almost invariably associated with items of horse harness.

On the western fringes of the Khaganate the Khazar army included significant Alan contingents, and up to three-quarters of their warrior burials contained axes, fighting knives and infantry bows; Alan cavalry rarely had armour, but were now armed with bow, sabre, fighting knife, axe and war-flail. The military equipment of Magyar and Bulgar soldiers was very similar to that of the Khazars during the 8th to 10th centuries, with bow, sabre, fighting knife, spear, axe and mace. There are no finds of identifiably Bulgar or Magyar armour from the steppes during this period, but Khazar helmets are known (and it is, of course, likely that any armour was normally too valuable to be deposited in the graves of any but the wealthiest warriors).



Khazar arrowheads, illustrating the wide range of shapes; the extremes are the slimmest armour-piercing points (16–19), and 'chisel' heads for causing maximum injury and blood-loss to unarmoured men and animals (20 and 23–26).
(1 & 18) from Lysiy Gorb; (2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 20, 23 & 25) from Chir-Yurt; (3,12, 14, 19 & 24) from Kochetok; (6 & 8) from Portovoye; (7) from Sukhaya Gomolsha; (9, 13, 16 & 17) from Krasnaya Gorka; (15 & 26) from Novaya Pokrovka; (21 & 22) from Syvashovka. (Drawings by A. Karbivnychyi after V. Kriganov)

Little is known about Eastern Slav military equipment, but it may have had features in common with that of the Northern Slavs. Examples of their war gear from Bititsa (Sumy region of northern Ukraine) included a sabre with a distinctive hilt, a war-flail, mace, wooden shield with a large boss or (less likely) a small round shield, battle-axes, arrowheads, spears, and a remarkable number of javelins.

OFFENSIVE WEAPONS

Bows and arrows

The normal scenario for an early-medieval battle between steppe nomads began with a shoot-out between archers, followed by a mêlée, and then the pursuit and slaughter of the vanquished. The side that was unable to endure the initial arrow-shower was immediately upon the defensive, and almost always lost.

Khazars bows were of complex construction, in the usual Central Asian form which had appeared at the start of the first millenium AD with the arrival of the Xiongnu (whom some scholars believe were ancestors of the Huns). The core of such a bow was made of various types of wood, strengthened by plates of bone attached to the outside. Examples preserved in burials show that the bone elements of the Khazar bow included lateral and frontal pieces, plus others on the ‘ears’ (tips) and the ‘belly’ (centre). The lateral plates were almost always paired, while the ears were in the form of elongated tapering plates with a notch for the bowstring. Bows from the 7th and 8th centuries were of the same design, but during the 8th century the shape of the ends of the lateral overlays changed slightly, becoming more elongated with the bowstring notch now off-centre; meanwhile, the central plates became almost leaf-shaped.

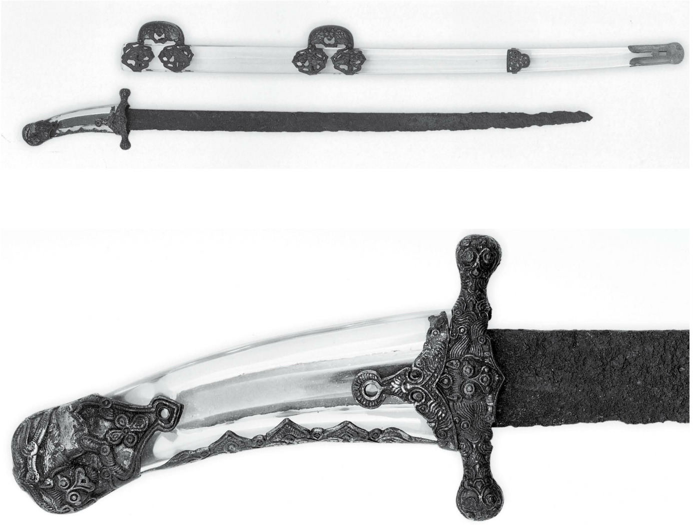
During the 9th and 10th centuries the number of bone elements decreases; the most common form is known as the ‘Saltov’ bow, which often had only one small upper frontal bone plate with a nock and grooves for the bowstring. A significant reduction in the weight of arrows also indicates that the power of the bow had decreased with this loss of bone plates, perhaps reflecting a change in horse-archery tactics.

A typical Khazar bowstring had loops to fit over the tips of the stave, which made it easier to replace a worn or damaged string and prolonged the weapon’s useful life. The string itself consisted of twisted cords of bull hide or braided sheep intestines, though silk threads were also used.

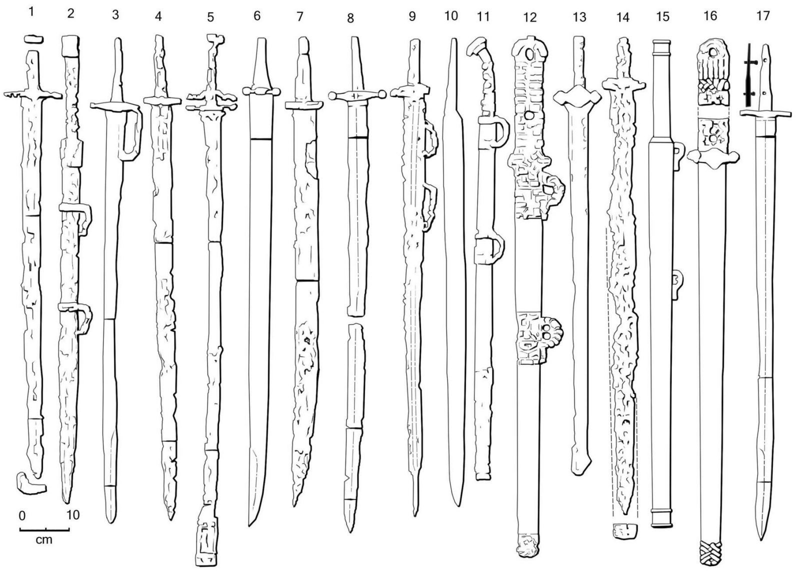
Substantial numbers of very varied arrowheads have been found in burials. Those from the Khazar period are iron and are generally leaf-shaped. In section the great majority are three-bladed; other forms such as two-bladed, flattened triangular, rhomboid, trapezoid, and some other styles are fewer in number. A noticeable decrease in the size of arrowheads, starting in the second half of the 8th century, along with the appearance of specialized armour-piercing types, was probably due to an increasing use of armour, perhaps especially mail. Small arrowheads are almost universal among the finds, though these also include some large examples with an almost chisel-shaped blade intended to cause the broadest possible wound to an unarmoured man or horse. In contrast the slenderest forms were designed to penetrate armour, especially mail. The earliest known examples of small, narrow, three-bladed armour-piercing arrowheads were found in Voznesenka in the Voronezh region of Russia, together with fragments of mail armour. No quivers survive from this period in the Khazar territories, only the metal loops and hooks by which they were carried.

Swords

The well-known reference to the Slavs paying tribute to the Khazars in the form of swords has sometimes been taken as evidence that straight, double-edged swords were superior to the single-edged sabres otherwise used by Khazars. Arguing against this is not only the interpretation of such tribute as a disarmament of the defeated, but the plain facts that sabres were not only still used by the Khazars right up until the collapse of the Khaganate under Russian pressure in the 10th and 11th centuries, but remained the most popular close-combat bladed weapon amongst steppe nomadic horsemen – and many other cavalry – for centuries to come. It may also be the case that the spread of sabres in much of Eastern Europe was closely associated with the Khazars.



Khazar-style sabre and scabbard furniture from the Caucasus, 10th century, with detail of hilt. (Furusiyah Art Foundation, inv. R-645)



Khazar swords and sabres, shown as they were found, with and without scabbards or their metal fittings:
(1, 4 & 5) from Dmitrovka; (2) from Syvashovka; (3) from Starokorsunskay; (6) from Kaazazovo; (7) from Stariy Saltov; (8) from Krasnaya Gorka; (9) from Krivay Luka; (10) from Arcibashevo; (11) from Verhniy Saltov; (13) from Vosnesenka; (14) from Zaplavka; (15) from Vinogradnoye; (17) from Sukhaya Gomolsha. (12 & 16) are reconstructions after A.K. Ambroz. (Drawings by A. Karbivnychyi after V. Kriganov)

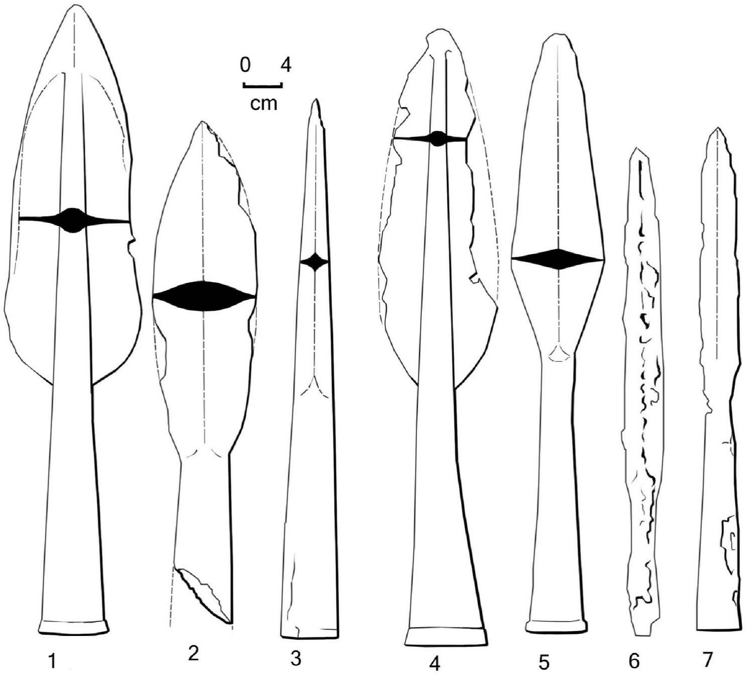
In the second half of the 7th century the swords found in steppe warrior burials are, with very few exceptions, single-edged ‘sabre’ types ranging in length from 75cm to 100cm including hilts (29.5–39.4in). The appearance of increasingly curved blades reflected a search for greater effectiveness in mounted combat, and in many 7th-century single-edged weapons the hilt was also curved towards the cutting edge. This style is unlikely to have been invented by the Khazars themselves, but was probably borrowed from the Persians. There is, however, no scholarly consensus regarding the origin of distinctive ‘D’ or ‘P’-shaped projections on the scabbard to attach the suspension straps.

In the mid-8th century the warriors of the Khazar Khaganate adopted an early form of curved or true sabre. According to A.V. Kryganov, the renowned expert on nomad weaponry:

> The length of the cutting part of the blade varies between 650 and 860mm (25.6–33.8in), more often being between 680 and 750mm; hilts are between 70 and 130mm long, usually 80 to 110mm (31.5–

> 43in); the width of the blade is between 30 and 44mm, more often 30 to 35mm (1.2–1.4in). Curvature is either uniform along the entire length of the blade, or is only in the last third of the blade. The hilt is either straight, or … bent toward the cutting edge. The ends of the blades are almost double-edged.[2]

A certain thickening towards the end of the blade may have produced greater striking power, or may simply have resulted from giving the weapon a doubled edge towards its point. In contrast to the 8th–9th century Khazars' highly effective close-combat cavalry or infantry weapon, the early Russian sword was really only effective on foot.



Khazar spearheads: (1–5) from Krasnaya Gorka; (6) from Glodosi; (7) from Novogrigorievka. (Drawings by A. Karbivnychyi after V. Kriganov)

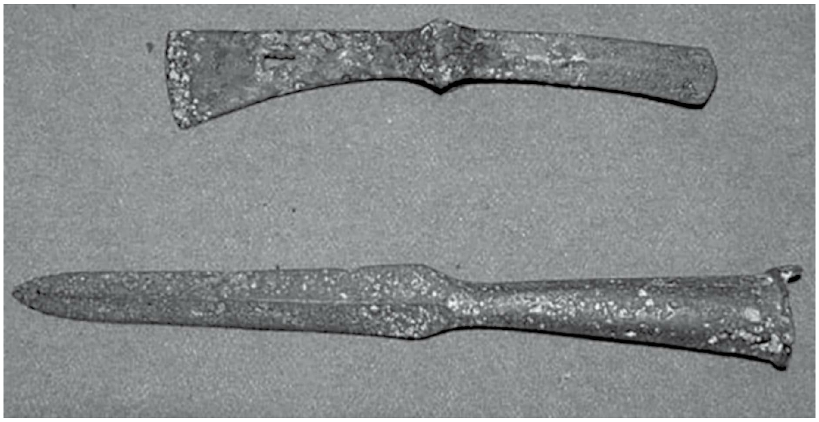
Daggers and fighting knives

Daggers traditionally served as auxiliary close-combat weapons amongst foot-soldiers, so it is not surprising that they did not immediately become widespread among the nomadic horse-riding population of the Khazar Khaganate. Early daggers did not significantly differ in shape from smaller knives, usually being single-edged with a straight grip. At the end of the 7th century a Turkish type of larger fighting knife, sometimes with a grip markedly curved towards the cutting edge, spread among the Khazars. This weapon, unknown earlier in Europe, may have been of Soghdian Central Asian origin, where it was the ancestor of the *khanjar* which then spread across most of the Islamic world and beyond.

Spears

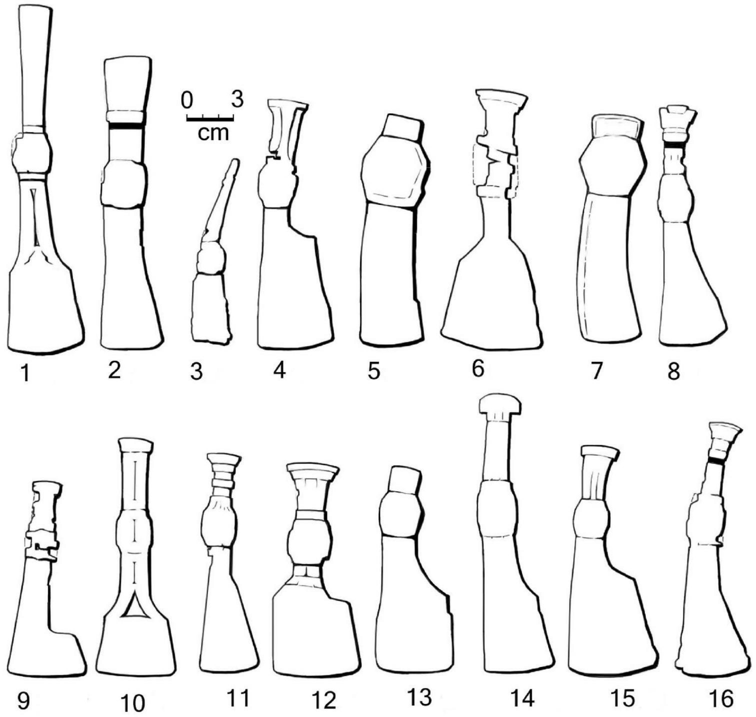
Across the Volga-Ural steppe region, metal spearheads had been known from the middle of the 3rd millennium BC. These had sockets rather than tangs for attachment to wooden shafts, often with an additional crimping ring which fixed the head more securely.

Khazar burials of the 7th century rarely contain spearheads; only at the turn of the 7th–8th centuries do spearheads with slender tetrahedral (i.e. ‘diamond-section’) blades appear in a Khazar context. The appearance of this form of weapon also coincided with fragments of mail armour being found in such burials. More specifically armour-piercing types of spearheads appeared in the 8th to 10th centuries, and were especially associated with the highly developed Saltov-Khazar culture. The majority of spearheads found in graves of both nomadic and settled Khazars, as well as in Alan and Bulgar burials, are of this basic form. Broader, leaf-shaped spearheads designed for engaging warriors who were unprotected by armour are rare, but there are nevertheless two main variants: spearheads with a diamond-shaped section, and two-ended spears having a metal butt or ferrule that could also be used to strike. Meanwhile, thrown javelins were only used in the Khaganate by Slav and Finno-Ugrian tribal warriors.



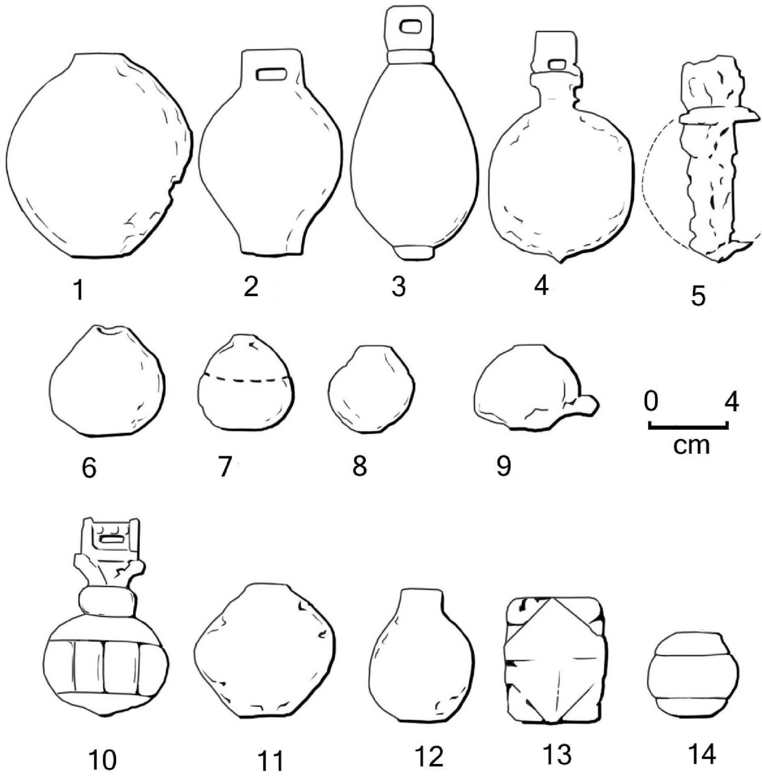
Battle-axe and spearhead found amongst the grave-goods of a Khazar warrior, whose helmet decoration suggested that he was Jewish. (Private collection)

The spearheads were mounted on slender wooden shafts, 3 to 4m long and up to 4.5cm in diameter (9ft 9in–13ft, x 1.8in); nowhere along its length was the shaft much thicker than the maximum diameter of the socket (from 0.8 to 1.7in). The shafts were made from straight saplings or pollard-poles of young trees, of species which varied with the local climates. As a rule, saplings were cut in late autumn or early winter during the period of minimum sap flow; they were then straightened and allowed to dry, after which the wood was scraped and polished to the desired size and shape.



Khazar axeheads: (1, 5, 8, 11, 14 & 16) from Sukhaya Gomolsha; (2 &13) from Netaylovka; (3) from Borisovo; (4) from Topoli; (6, 9 & 12) from Krasnaya Gorka; (7) from Zheltoe; (10) from Kochetok; (15) from Lysiy Gorb. (Drawings by A. Karbivnychyi after V. Kriganov)

Shafts might also be bound with metal bands to increase their strength when thrusting, and the addition of rawhide or birch-bark bindings gave a more secure grip. To make carrying the spear easier, a rawhide strap was attached (which the Cossacks later called a *temyak*). Again judging by Cossack fighting styles, the medieval steppe nomads might have fastened a looped leather strap near the butt of the shaft for the rider’s foot, to keep his weapon in an upright position when on horseback.



Weights from Khazar war-flails: (1, 7 & 13) from Krasnaya Gorka; (2) from Sarkel; (3) from Oboznoye; (4 & 9) from Verhniy Saltov; (5) from Mayaki; (6, 8, 10–12 & 14) from Sukhaya Gomolsha. (Drawings by A. Karbivnychyi after V. Kriganov)

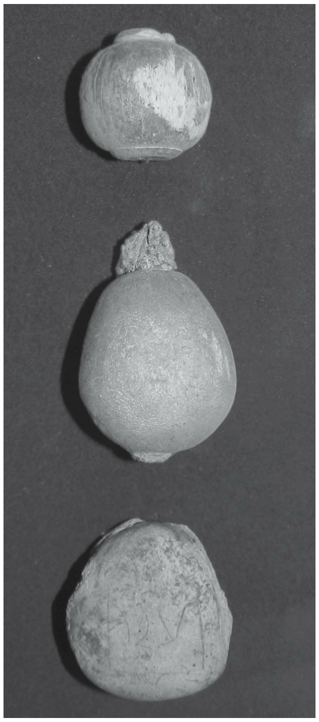
The methods of using this type of spear could vary, and the following examples are based upon available data:

(1) With a firm grip at the point of balance: the shaft is clamped under the bent arm tightly pressed against the warrior's body. The effectiveness of the thrust and impact of the lance depended upon the speed of the horse at the moment of contact.

(2) Couched: the shaft is grasped nearer its lower end, and either rests beneath the armpit or is tightly pressed into it, with the arm bent at the elbow in a horizontal position. The result is a significant increase in the effective reach of the lance, but makes it difficult to control in a horizontal position because it is not grasped at the point of balance.

(3) With a free grip: the spear is held in one hand in a horizontal 'trail' position. Immediately before the moment of contact, the warrior thrusts his arm in whatever direction he chooses. This results in a weaker impact, but allows the rider to fence with the spear and use it to deflect enemy blows.

(4) With a fixed ‘dart’ grip: the weapon is held overarm in one hand, as if to throw it like a javelin. This permits a downwards blow, and was typical when in combat against men on foot.



Weights from nomad – probably Khazar – and early medieval Russian war-flails. (State Historical Museum, Chernihiv; photograph Mikhail Zhirohov)

Axes

The use of battle-axes by the peoples of the Khazar Khaganate reflected the influence of long-established Caucasian tradition. In fact such axes are not known in early Khazar and Bulgar burials, but are present in large numbers in Alan sites. Under Alan influence, battle-axes subsequently came to be used by the semi-settled Khazar population from at least the 7th century.

The axe was a universal weapon in the sense that it could be used by both horsemen and infantrymen. The handle was made of hardwood such as cornel or maple, normally from 60 to 75cm long (23–30in). In battle the axe’s effectiveness was comparable to that of a sabre, but it was much cheaper to manufacture. (Because axes were the most readily available weapons to the poorest among the population during the early period, little distinction may have been made between a weapon of war and a work-tool.) Nevertheless, all surviving axes are eye-catching weapons, though relatively small in size and weight. Their shapes can be categorized according to the details of both the blade and the socket which fits around the handle, but the majority of war axes from the Saltov culture are of one type, having a narrow, elongated blade; a small number also have a smaller secondary blade on the back of the head.

War-flails

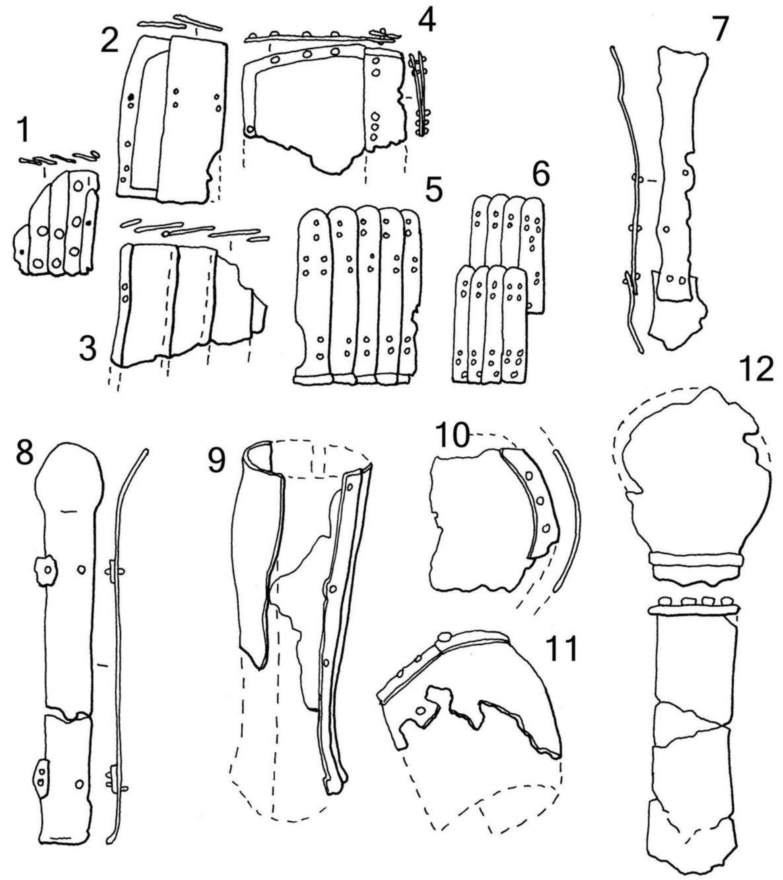
The war-flail was a variety of mace, consisting of a ball or other weight hanging from a short handle by means of a strap, plaited thongs or more rarely a chain. It was not easy to use in combat, requiring considerable room to deliver an effective blow. It was solely an offensive weapon, being useless as a means of defence, so those who used the war-flail may usually have been equipped with shields. Nevertheless, the number of finds suggests that it was effective, perhaps in the hands of both cavalry and infantry in fast-moving skirmishes. Consequently the flail may have been carried as part of a warrior’s full panoply, for use when a suitable occasion arose.

The war-flails of Khazar warriors may be divided by minor variations; in the most massive form the strap passed through a longitudinal hole in a flange at the top of the weight. The most common type had an oval weight made of bone with an inset iron bar, while other types had a solid weight made entirely of bone, stone, iron, bronze or lead.

DEFENSIVE EQUIPMENT

Body armour

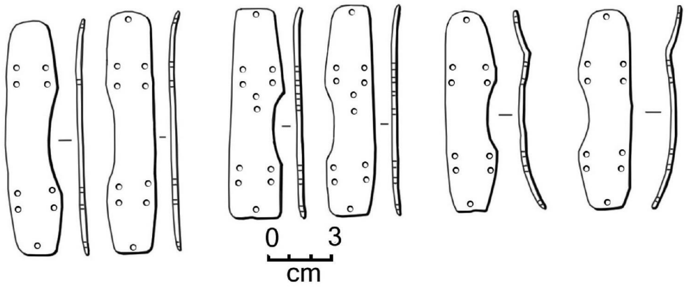
The appearance of armour among the Khazars can be traced back to the end of the 7th century, but the fact that only small fragments of mail have been found in such contexts seems to suggest that, as yet, full mail hauberks were rarely used. Perhaps mail was so expensive, having been imported from elsewhere, that small sections might have been sewn onto a leather or textile basis to protect particularly vulnerable parts of the body? In some warrior burials mail was found together with remnants of lamellar armour. It is probable that in this period efforts were still being made to achieve an optimal design which resulted, by the middle of the 8th century, in the adoption of a full mail hauberk, like those already seen in wealthier and more settled cultures. However, the mail found in Khazar-period graves was often of sophisticated manufacture, combining both riveted and hammer-welded links. The latter are sometimes made of square-section wire, formed into rings with a diameter of 10 to 14mm (0.4–0.5in). In their complete form most mail shirts had short sleeves, and slits in the hem of the skirt to prevent it riding up when astride a horse.

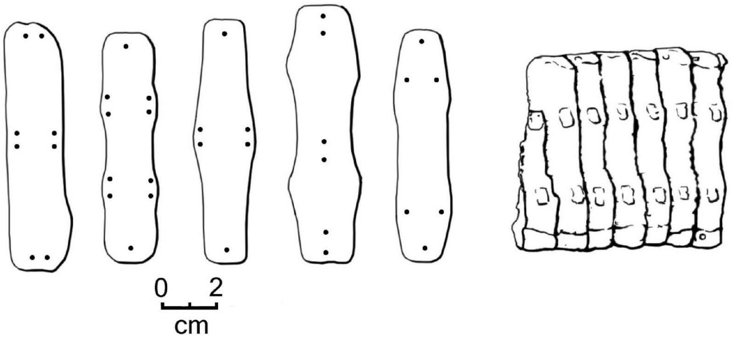


Fragmentary finds of Khazar armour:
(1 & 4) Riveted lamellar armour from Verhniy Chir-Yurt graves, 7th–8th centuries; (2 & 3) unriveted fragments from same site; (5) lamellar armour from Ostryi near Kislovodsk, 7th–8th Cs; (6) lamellar armour from ‘Kozzyi skaly’ on Mt Beshtau, near Pyatigorsk, 9th–10th Cs; (7) splint vambrace from same site; (8) splint greave from same site; (9) iron greave from Borisovskiy graves near Gelendjik, 8th–9th Cs; (10) fragment of iron shoulder plate from Verhniy Chir-Yurt graves, 7th–8th Cs; (11) fragment of iron shoulder plate from Borisovskiy graves, near Gelendjik, 8th–9th Cs; (12) pieces of iron horse chamfron from Dimitrievskiy graves on Severskiy Donets river, 9th–10th centuries. (David Nicolle after Gorelik, 2002)

As pointed out by the Russian historian of arms and armour, Dr M.V. Gorelik, developments in armour were amongst the Khazars’ greatest technological achievements during the 7th to 9th centuries. In fact, the Khazars drew upon the traditions of Central Asia and China, Transoxania, Iran and Byzantium to produce something genuinely new, and the skilled armourers of the north Caucasus ensured that the results were often of the highest quality.[3]

Lamellar armour was popular from the Pacific to the Danube, and it was certainly important in the Khazar Khaganate. For reasons which remain unclear, lamellae with curved and scalloped edges fell out of fashion during the 6th and 7th centuries, and had disappeared by the close of the 8th century. What remained were rectangular plates with slightly rounded tops. These were central to the Khazar armourer's art, and what came next demanded technological skills previously seen only amongst the Romans at the beginning of the 1st millenium AD. (Indeed, such skills only reappeared in Western and Central Europe at the close of the medieval period, though they probably survived in Byzantium.) Khazar armourers learned – perhaps from the Byzantines – how to connect plates, scales or other forms of lamellae by joining them with iron rivets rather than rawhide thongs. Even more significantly, they used a system of 'loose riveting', which required huge skill if the resulting armour was to be both flexible and strong. Such armours were, in fact, almost as flexible as traditional lamellar construction while being considerably stronger, because it was much more difficult to break or 'pop' an iron rivet than it was to cut leather, rawhide or silk lacing with a blow from a blade.

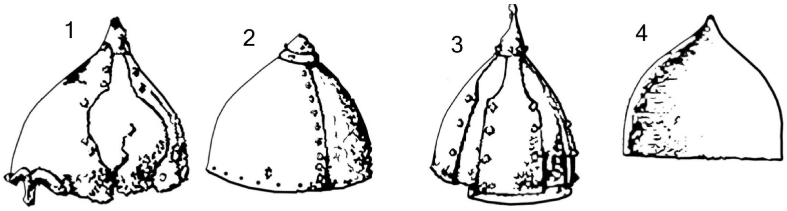




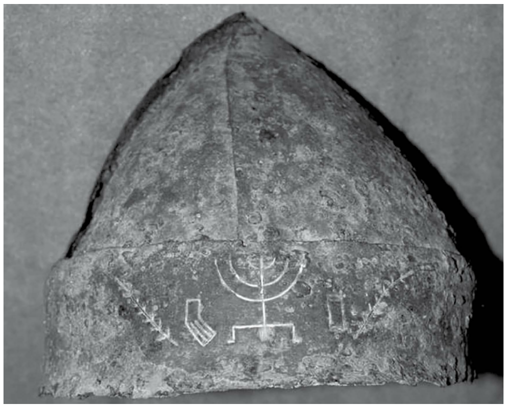
Lamellae from Khazar cuirasses made in typical Asian nomad style, found during various unidentified archaeological excavations. (Drawings by A. Karbivnychyi)

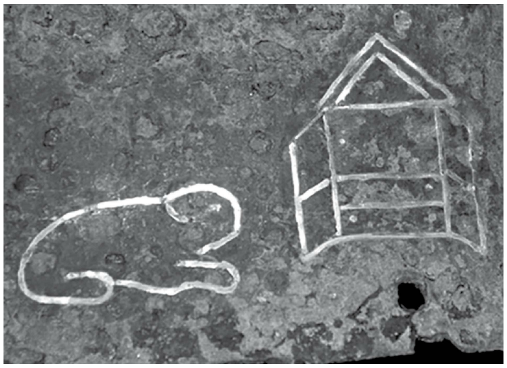
Another Khazar development was domed shoulder plates forged from a single piece of steel, which were then strapped to the cuirass – a form of protection probably developed from similar shoulder-pieces known in Eastern Turkestan during the 8th century. A cuirass with these ‘pauldrons’ still left most of the arms exposed, along with much of the body and the legs below the waist. To solve this the Khazars wore mail hauberks beneath the lamellar cuirass, in a style of armour that remained characteristic of Central Asia from the 6th century until beyond the end of the medieval period.

Yet another Eastern idea adopted by the Khazars was a pair of greaves forged from two substantial strips of metal connected by loops, almost certainly of rawhide or leather, and secured to the wearer’s shins by buckled straps. Further strips of metal with curved edges could also be riveted to the fronts of such greaves. Comparable greaves appear in Chinese sculptures and wall paintings from the 7th to 9th centuries, as well as in some Central Asian wall paintings of a similar period, and, famously, in some Scandinavian ‘splint’ armour of the immediate pre-Viking era.



Khazar helmets: (1) from Stolbishe; (2) from Sarkel; (3) from Lisiy Gorb; (4) from an unknown location. (Drawings by A. Karbivnychyi)





Decorations on the front and back of the deep brow-band of a helmet found amongst the grave-goods of a Khazar warrior, which suggest that he was of Jewish faith. See also **Plate G2**. (Private collection)

Helmets

The typical Khazar helmet was made of four segments riveted directly together, plus a conical top element or finial, and often a straight nasal bar. Helmets often also had a mail aventail attached to their rim, reaching the shoulders, to protect the back and sides of the head and neck. Images of warriors in such equipment appear in a number of places, including inscribed bone plates from the Shilovsky mound near the Oka River. A scene of battle on another engraved bone object from the Khazar stronghold of Sarkel portrays a lightly armoured, spear-armed horseman striking a heavily armoured soldier in his only unprotected place – his face. In contrast, many Alan helmets appear to have been *Spangenhelme* made of hardened leather elements attached to an iron frame consisting of a lower rim, eight vertical strips and a plate at the top.

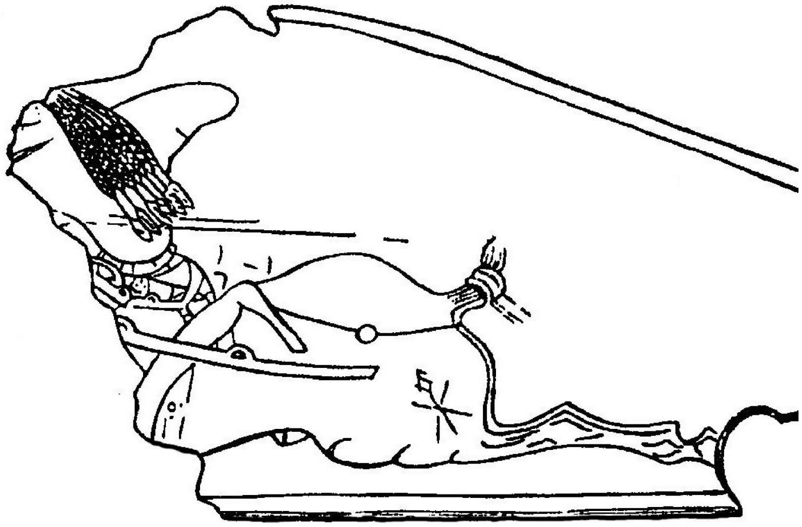
Shields

There is no reliable archaeological data concerning Khazar shields, because their wood and leather are not preserved. However, the nomadic Khazars clearly used the standard Turkic shield of this period, which was round, and usually approximately 78cm (30in) in diameter. It was made of five wooden boards, each 15–18cm (6–7in) wide and not more than 1cm (0.4in) thick. On the inside, these boards were connected to a wooden crossbar. Such a shield could not long withstand the full impact of a cutting weapon; this indicates that the Turks did not rely on their shields in close combat, but primarily used them for defence against arrows.

On a further engraved bone object from Sarkel we see warriors without shields in their hands, though there are round objects which might represent shields lying on the ground. This seems likely, because a warrior who has been struck by a spear has thrown his bow on the ground while his sword also flies from his hand. In one Khazar grave, a slightly domed iron disk with a diameter of about 25cm (9.8in) and a thickness of 0.5cm was found, in the centre of which is a large rivet which had been driven in from the inside. The exact purpose of this object remains unclear, but it may have been used as a small 'elbow shield' attached to the arm by a leather strap. Such a defence could only be useful in close combat to deflect a slashing blow.

Horse harness

In a nomadic environment the horse was an essential feature of life, so items of harness were objects of everyday rather than specifically military use. By the end of the 7th century the Khazars were far from alone in using a rigid wooden saddle with stirrups. On the steppes the wood-framed saddle itself dated back to around the 4th century AD, so it is possible, even without the confirmation of archaeological finds, that the Khazars used it from an even earlier date – perhaps with leather-loop stirrups, which similarly left no archaeological trace. Metal stirrups first appeared in Central Europe with the Avars in the 7th century, but they only spread more widely across Eastern Europe during the Khazar period.



Surviving part of horse-archer figure carved on decorated bone reinforcing plate of a Khazar-period saddle. Note long braided hair with pendant ornaments; careful depiction of sabre with D-shaped scabbard projections, and floppy end of case for unstrung bow, suspended at his left hip by separate belts; and the stallion's knotted tail and brand. (Archive of M Zhirohov)

The combination of a rigid wooden saddle and metal stirrups gave greater security to a horseman's 'seat' – in other words, it was more difficult to knock him off his horse – and they also enabled the rider to strike more varied and powerful blows with a range of weapons, especially spear and sword. The stirrup itself had not originally been developed for this purpose, however; in its earliest manifestation it simply allowed a warrior to ride for longer without tiring, by improving circulation in his legs and thus making him less vulnerable to prolonged exposure to cold while in the saddle. In the context of combat, however, rigid saddles and metallic stirrups certainly contributed to the development of the curved sabre and other close-combat weapons, and thus, by extension, to the further development of cavalry armour and helmets.

2 Kryganov, A.V., *Armament and Equestrian Equipment of Nomads of the South of Eastern Europe in the 7th–10th Centuries* (Historical science thesis, in Russian; Kharkov, 1987) 60–61

3 Gorelik, M.V., 'Arms and Armour in South-Eastern Europe in the Second Half of the First Millenium AD', in D. Nicolle (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval Arms and Armour* (Woodbridge, 2002) 134.

FORTIFICATIONS

Various written sources mention the 7th–8th century Khazars' habit of assembling their wagons into a defensive circle, strengthened by the addition of shields, even during pauses on the march. By the 7th century, however, they also began using more permanent fortifications in particularly threatened regions, the earliest known examples being found in Chir-Yurt, Andrewaul and elsewhere in Daghestan. Nevertheless, the question of whether nomadic Khazars themselves actually built these fortifications remains controversial, as the structures might more plausibly be credited to the local settled populations.

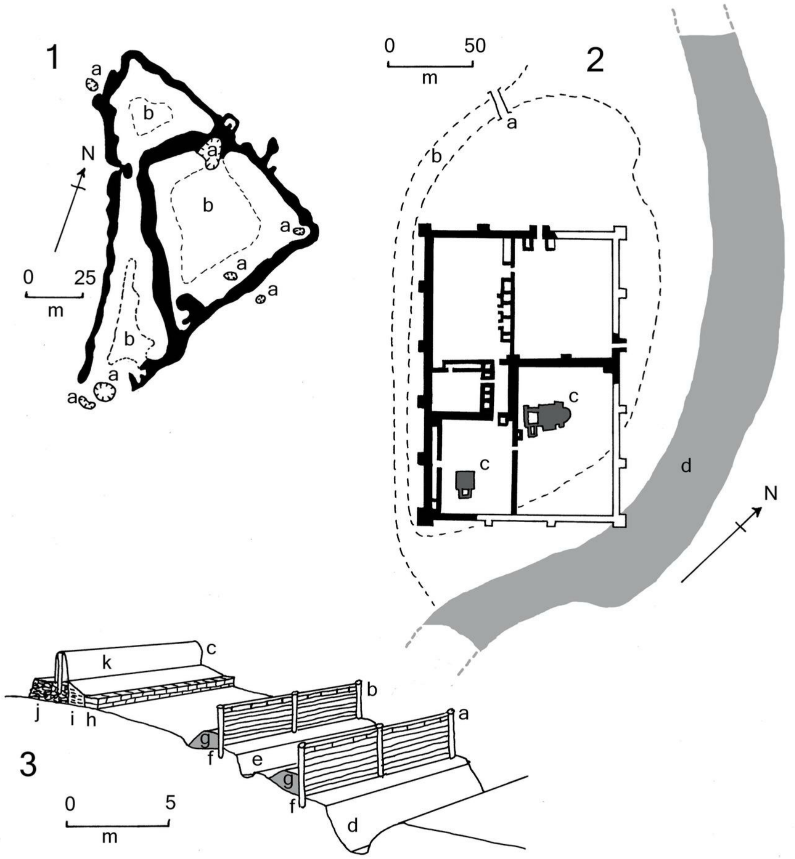
Classification

The north-western border of the Khaganate was a dangerously exposed region, where about 40 fortified locations dating from Khazar times have been found in the Don and Seversky Donets river basins. These can be divided into the following types:

(1) Fortifications of the immediate pre-Khazar period (pre-7th century), whose defensive works were almost never rebuilt.

(2) Fortifications located on narrow coastal promontories, and protected only on the landward side. In the construction of such sites natural features of terrain were maximized; slopes were steepened, and two or three lines of defences added. They vary in the presence or absence of additional defences along the water perimeters of the promontory.

(3) Fortifications constructed of stone or brick with clearly defined geometric plans, usually roughly rectangular, and sometimes with towers. These show a considerable advance over the earlier examples in both architectural and defensive capabilities. They could also sustain a permanent or replaceable garrison – for example at Sarkel, where 300 individuals were reportedly rotated each year. The building of such a fortress is estimated to have required over 20,000 man-working days, so their construction can only have been a planned state action. Furthermore, the concentration of this type of fortress along the north-western border of Khazar territory highlights the fact that they were intended to face a powerful north-western enemy, which can only have been Kievan Russia.



Fortifications in the Khazar Khaganate.

(1) Defensive earthworks at Pravoberezhny, Tsimlyansky district, 8th–10th centuries: (a) pits; (b) internal raised areas.

(2) Fortress of Sarkel, AD 833–965, with trace of brick walls and towers shown black: (a) presumed site of entrance bridge; (b) ditch; (c) later internal buildings; (d) bed of River Don.

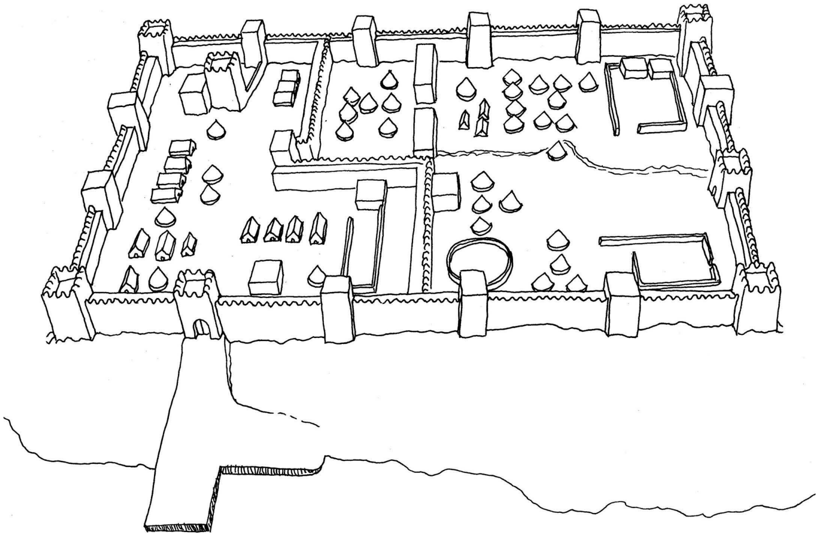
(3) Sectional reconstruction of defences in the northern sector of Verkhniy Saltov hill fort: (a) outer defences; (b) middle defences; (c) inner defences; (d) first ditch; (e) second ditch; (f) timber palisades; (g) earth platform; (h) brick outer shell; (i) inner shell; (j) rubble platform; (k) clay cladding over wooden framework. (Drawings by David Nicolle)

The evidence from Sarkel

Sarkel is an example of this third type. In 834–837, at the request of the Khagan’s government, Petron Kamatir and a team of Byzantine engineers built a fortress on the bank of the Don river, near present-day Tsimlyansk. Its name in the Ugrian tongue meant ‘White House’, while Russian chroniclers call it the ‘White Tower’. This fortification was initially intended as a defence against the migrating Magyars, and was both inhabited and garrisoned by Khazars and Bulgars.

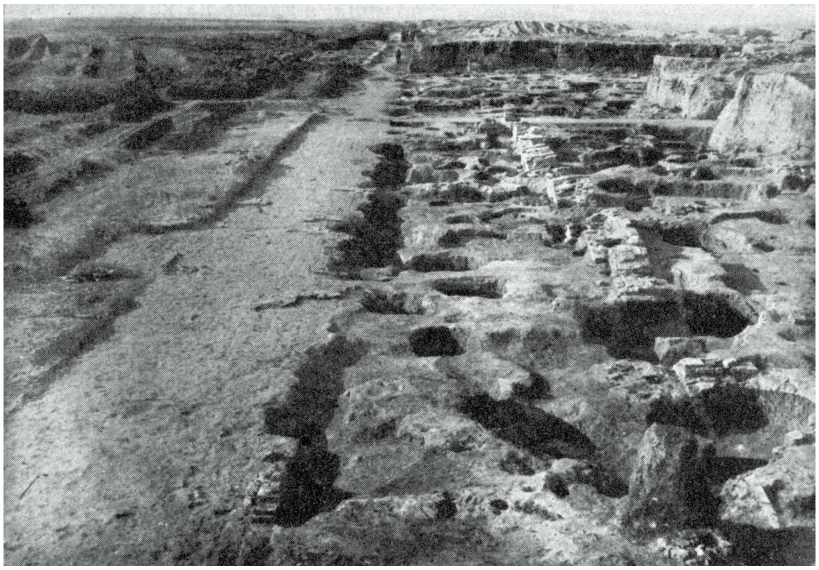
The fortress of Sarkel was a regular rectangle measuring 193.5 x 133.5m (634.6ft x 437.8ft), oriented along a south-east to north-west axis. Its walls were made of red brick laid in a local manner, having a thickness of 3.75m (12.3ft) and an original height of no less than 10m (32.8ft). These walls were strengthened with protruding towers plus larger corner towers, and the main entrance was through a gate in a north-western tower. Internal walls also divided the fortress into several parts, and the smallest, south-eastern part had no external exits. This served as the main stronghold, within which, in the southern corner, stood a square main tower or donjon.

Despite the participation of Byzantine craftsmen, and having an essentially Byzantine plan, Sarkel fortress was built following local traditions. Substantial ramparts and moats separated the cape on which it was built from the main shore, but the walls and towers lacked true foundations, having been built directly onto levelled ground. For the bonding of walls a liquid lime solution was used with the addition of sand, and the bricks had actually been made and fired inside the walled areas, seemingly overseen by Byzantine craftsmen. The main internal walls separating the parts of the fortress were only slightly thinner than the external wall. Within the fortification there were large, long brick buildings whose floors were paved with either brick or a lime cement. According to the written sources, the Byzantine engineer Petron Kamatir had wanted to erect a stone church within the fortress but was not permitted to do so. Instead the stone columns and capitals that he had brought from Byzantine territory for this purpose were simply abandoned on the nearby steppe.



Reconstuction of the fortress at Sarkel. The viewpoint is looking south-westwards from the bank of the Don. (Drawing by David Nicolle)

By building Sarkel the Khazars not only protected themselves from Rus, but could now block the trade route between Kiev and Atil. In the event, Sarkel only served as a simple military fortress for one or two decades; thereafter settlers began to take over the site, and Sarkel rapidly became a centre for merchants and craftsmen, with a multi-ethnic population of Bulgars, Ghuzz, Khazars and others. Eventually almost the entire area between the river and the dry moat of the fortress itself was built up with yurt tents and semi-dugout houses. When there was no free space left the brick fortifications themselves began to be partially re-configured.



Excavations at Sarkel during the 1930s, showing bases of the fortified wall and towers. (Archive of M Zhirohov)

The evidence of ceramics and certain aspects of the habitations suggest that Bulgars inhabited the south-eastern part of Sarkel and Slavs the north-western corner, while the citadel was inhabited by Turks – Khazars and Ghuzz – who formed the garrison. In addition to guarding Sarkel and the important route on which it stood, they also collected dues from passing merchants using the river and the road north and south.

Sarkel was taken by the Rus prince Svyatoslav in 965, and was badly damaged during his assault, but the location continued to be inhabited until the 12th century. By that time Sarkel had become a Russian steppe outpost known as Belaya Vezha or ‘White Vezhi’, and it was during this period that Russian colonization started to spread across the Don and Seversky Donets river areas.

Then, at the start of the 12th century, rising Kipchaq (Polovtsian) pressure on Kievan Rus made sustaining White Vezhi increasingly difficult. In 1103, while returning from a campaign against the Kipchaqs and intending to strengthen Russian influence in this region, Prince Vladimir Monomakh brought with him both Kipchaqs and Torks (another nomadic Turkish tribe) as settlers. Until 1117 they formed the garrison of Russian Belaya Vezha, but in that year the Kipchaqs and Torks turned against the Russians and forced most of the inhabitants of Sarkel-Belaya Vezha to flee to more secure Russia territory. Thereafter Kipchaq and Tork nomads roamed the region and raided Russia itself. Even so, a small number of Slav Rus remained in what had been Sarkel, and were later mentioned in Russian chronicles as '*brodniki*'.

* * *

Generally speaking, the defences of Khazar fortresses were rather feeble when compared with those raised by the Byzantine Empire. The only exceptions were perhaps found in what is now Daghestan; elsewhere, Khazar builders placed their walls directly on the surface of the ground, making them easy to undermine. Often they also had their gates positioned so that an attacking enemy could approach with his shields facing the defenders, making the task of defence more difficult; this can be seen at the Süren fortress near Bakhchysarai in Crimea, which probably served as an outpost for Sarkel itself.

One might summarize by saying that Khazar fortifications were not really capable of resisting serious Byzantine or Islamic assaults. This was probably because fortifications on the steppes were not strategically very important for a state and culture like that of the Khazars. On the other hand, Khazar fortifications in the Crimea would have faced the Byzantines, while those close to Derbent and the Caspian Gates would have faced the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates and their successors, all of whom were at the forefront of siege technology, thus rendering existing Khazar military architecture virtually useless.

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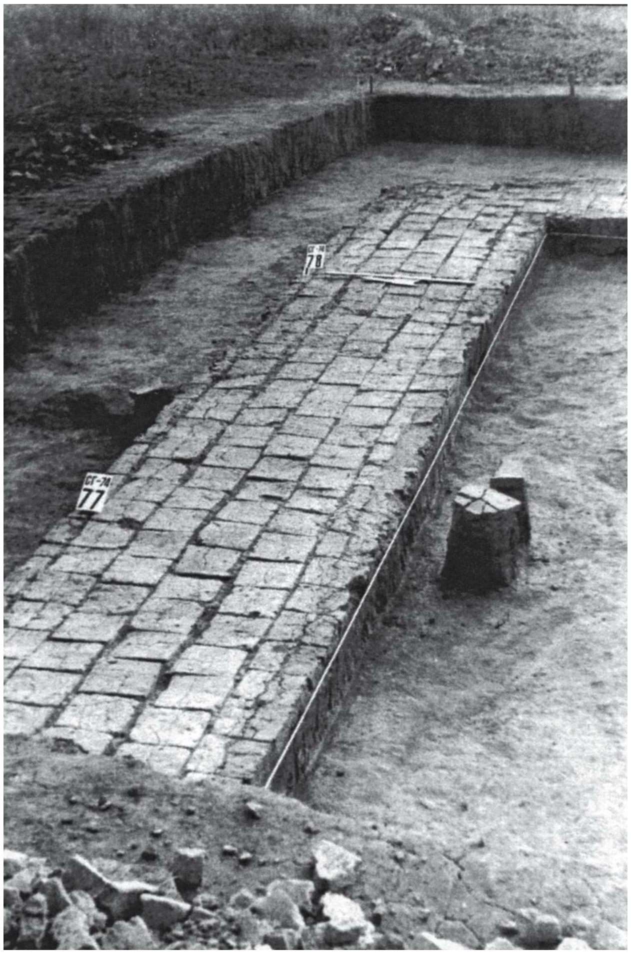
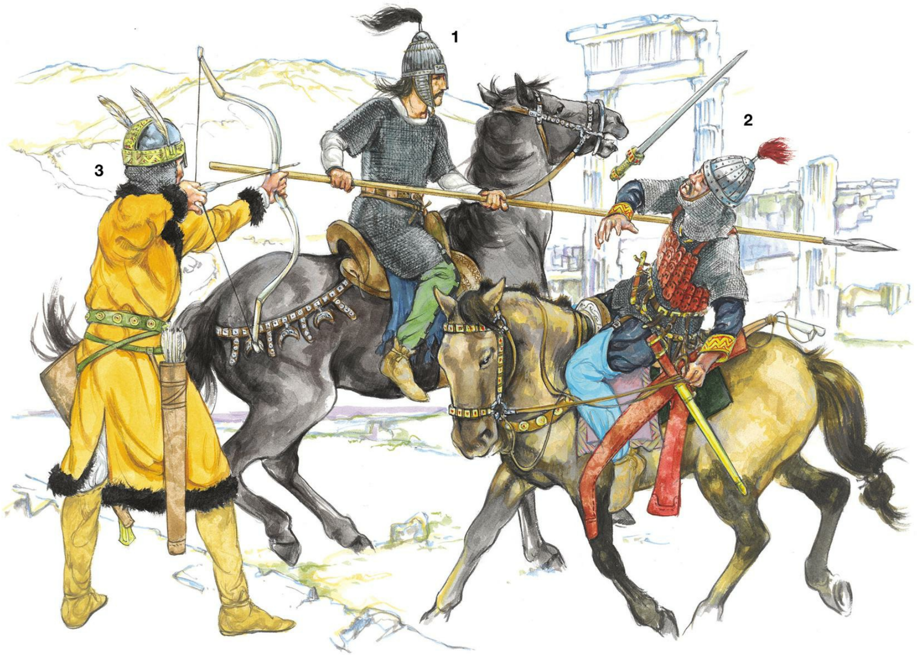


Excavations at the Khazar-period fortress at Semikarakorsk beside the lower Don River, showing the brick foundations of the north-eastern corner. (Archive of M Zhirohov)

PLATE COMMENTARIES



1: Alan armoured cavalryman, 5th C
2: Eastern Hun armoured cavalryman, 4th–5th Cs
3: Western Hun horse archer, 5th C

A1: Alan armoured cavalryman, 5th century

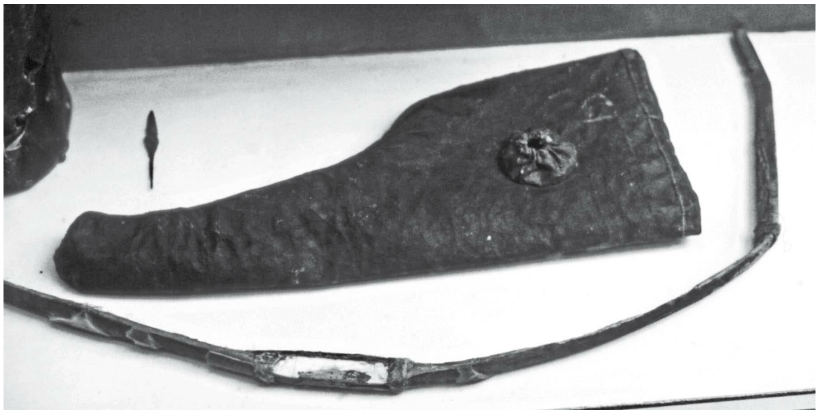
Depicted fighting Huns in the ruins of a Roman town in Crimea, this horseman’s lack of archery equipment shows that he still operates in a style rooted in Iranian cavalry traditions. His ‘splinted’ or lamellar helmet, laced together with rawhide thongs, is of a form which could be found across much of Asia, as far as China and perhaps India, but which was also brought to Europe during the ‘great migrations’ of the early medieval period. He wears a long mail hauberk over a linen tunic, woollen trousers (note broken-line pattern down front), and leather ankle-boots; he has no shield, which was an encumbrance rather than a defence when wielding a heavy spear with both hands. Hidden on his left side is a long, straight sword with a ‘bracket’ slide on its scabbard; silvered bronze fitments would be feasible, perhaps with semi-precious stones on the sword guard. His large Persian horse has a long combed mane, forelock and tail; the harness has silvered bronze ornaments, but the leather-covered wooden saddle lacks stirrups.

A2: Eastern Hun armoured cavalryman, 4th–5th centuries

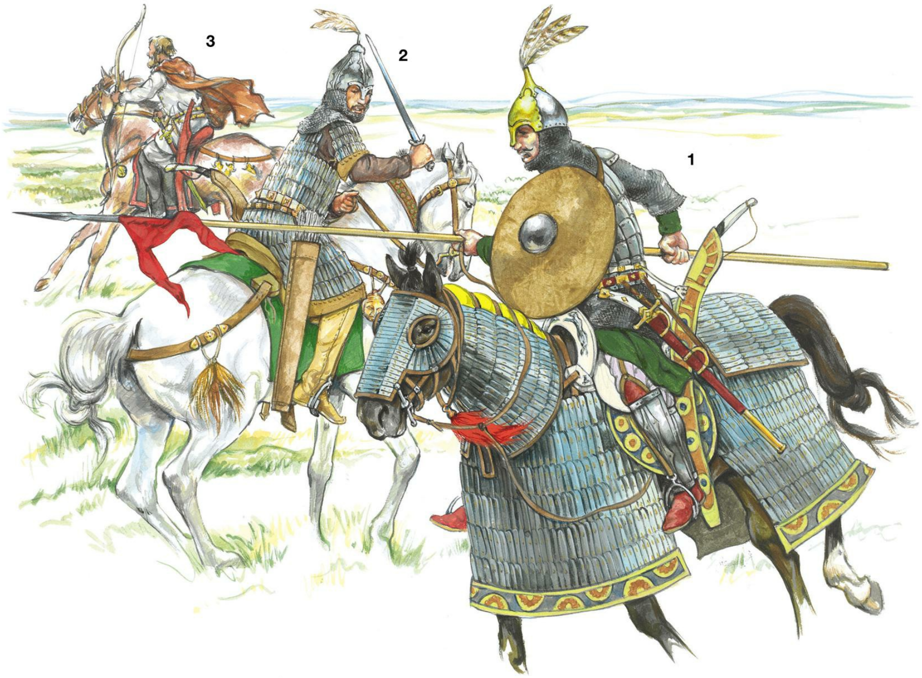
There were clearly variations between the equipment of elite warriors in different parts of the vast but ephemeral Hun Empire; this warrior represents what is known about the eastern regions. He has a helmet of many directly riveted iron segments, and a small mail hauberk worn beneath a limited form of rawhide lamellar cuirass. He wears silk-covered horseman’s leggings suspended at the front from a belt under his hauberk and tunic, rather than large riding boots. His weapons, apart from a fighting knife hung horizontally in front of his right hip, all hang at his left side. His single-edged sword is a straight ‘*palash*’ type rather than a curved sabre; his emptied quiver would carry arrows with their flights uppermost, and his bow-case is for an unstrung weapon. He still lacks stirrups, and his saddle, though containing wooden formers, is not yet of the fully wood-framed type. His Turko-Mongol pony has the mane clipped in three tufts, but a long knotted tail.

A3: Western Hun horse archer, 5th century

This dismounted rider from a more western region has a ‘ridge’ helmet which may be of late Roman origin, though now highly decorated with gilt bands in what Romans would have considered a barbarian manner; it also has a mail aventail. His heavy fleece-lined coat hides a mail hauberk, and he wears soft leather leggings with integral feet. Obscured here is a straight, double-edged sword at his left side; its scabbard might have a slide carved from jade and originally from Central Asia. His simple quiver still carries the arrows flights uppermost and thus unprotected, though his bow-case accommodates the weapon when strung.



Alan bow, and case for a strung bow, from Moschevaya Balka, 8th–9th centuries. The bow stave has adopted the typical forwards-curving shape of a reflex bow when unstrung; for a full study, see Osprey Weapons 43, *The Composite Bow*. (Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg; photograph David Nicolle)



1: Khazar warrior, 7th C
2: Sabirian armoured cavalryman, 6th–7th Cs
3: Western steppes nobleman, 7th C

B1: Khazar warrior, 7th century

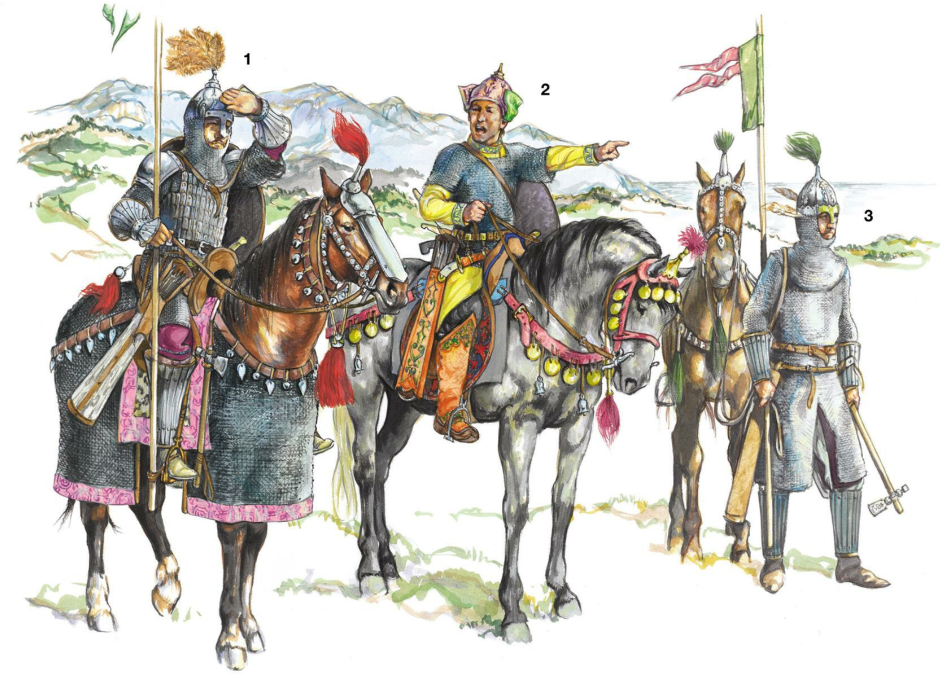
The degree of metallurgical and technological sophistication achieved by the still largely nomadic Khazars in the 7th century might suggest some (perhaps considerable) influence from south or east of the steppes. However, in the Byzantine, Iranian, early Islamic or even Chinese empires there is still little archaeological evidence for such features as plate shoulder defences (pauldrons), greaves with applied ‘splints’, or ‘loose-riveted’ lamellar armour – but all these features are shown here. Khazar wealth is suggested by the gilded front plate of his directly riveted segmented helmet. His full panoply consists of a single-edged straight sword with a curved hilt, in a brass-fitted scabbard with ‘D’-shaped projections for suspension; a spear with a two-tailed pennon; a leather-covered wooden shield with an iron boss; a composite bow carried unstrung in a brightly painted case; plus (obscured here) a quiver to carry arrows points uppermost, and a large fighting knife or *khanjar* perhaps made en suite with the sword. This impressive level of equipment would also become typical of some neighbouring cultures, not least the Islamic Caliphate. His horse is protected by full lamellar armour including a chamfron, and a red-dyed horsetail tassel hangs below the bridle. The saddle is of the fully wood-framed type long known among many Inner Asian nomads and the Chinese, and the harness now includes iron stirrups.

B2: Sabirian armoured cavalryman, 6th–7th centuries

This Sabir (Savir) tribal warrior illustrates the sophistication achieved by the Khazars' immediate predecessors north of the Caucasus. His helmet consists of four large segments riveted to vertical framing and joined beneath a crowning dome; like B1's, it has 'eyebrows' with a nasal bar and an attached ringmail aventail, while lacking a brow-band. His substantial cuirass and upper arm defences are of iron lamellae laced with rawhide thongs, leaving only his forearms and his lower legs in soft leather boots unprotected. His archery equipment is of a form seen across most of the Eurasian steppes, while his single-edged sword is still straight. The apparent tassels hanging from his horse's crupper strap may be the hair of defeated and captured foes, while just visible hanging from the breast strap is one of a pair of bright bronze discs with simple images of human faces, which may recall earlier head-hunting practices.

B3: Western steppes nobleman, 7th century

Just visible in the background is a rider in everyday dress, from one of a number of 'relic populations' left in what is now Ukraine and some neighbouring areas after the great migrations of the 4th–5th centuries. Perhaps Slavic or Germanic, his general appearance and clothing look European rather than from a nomadic steppe culture, but his sword, archery equipment and horse harness show strong Iranian influence.



1: Khazar heavy cavalryman, 9th C
2: Alan cavalryman, late 9th–early 10th Cs
3: Kabarian cavalryman, late 9th–early 10th Cs

C1: Khazar heavy cavalryman, 9th century

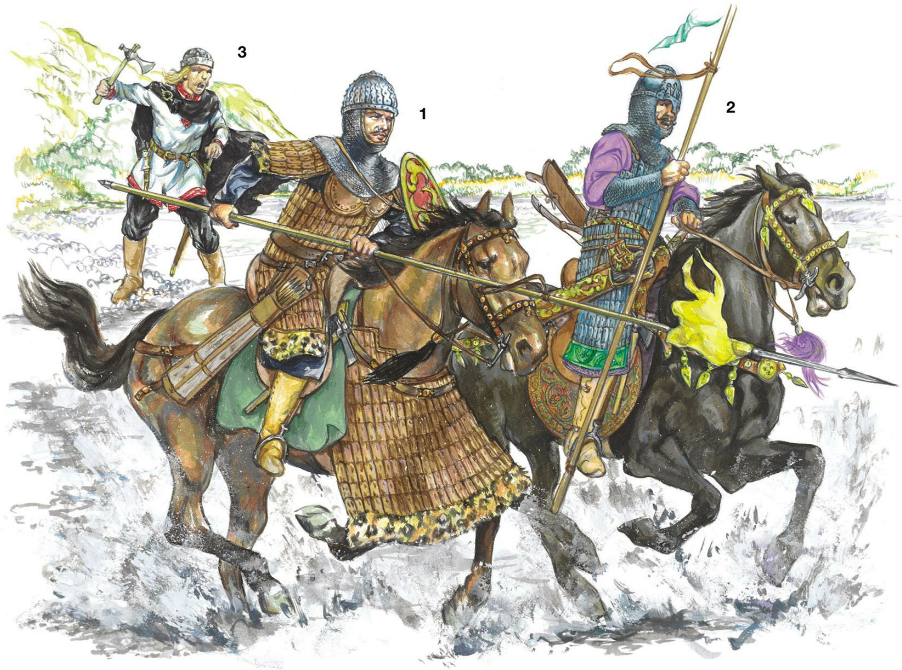
At the highpoint of Khazar power the elite of fully armoured cavalryman wore almost as much armour as later medieval Western European men-at-arms. This included a segmented iron helmet with a substantial nasal bar, mail aventail and plumed spire; a half-sleeved, long-hemmed mail hauberk, under an iron lamellar cuirass laced with rawhide thongs; substantial iron shoulder plates; splinted ‘bell-topped’ iron gauntlets, and similar splinted iron greaves. Prepared for close combat with spear, shield, sword, fighting knife, and a battle-axe slung by a leather loop at the front of his saddle, this man also carries full archery equipment. His horse has a mail trapper and a limited form of iron chamfron consisting of two elements riveted together, but lacks neck protection. Note the lavishly ornamented and tasselled harness, and (just visible under his leg) the panel of spotted animal-pelt over the patterned silk saddle-cloth.

C2: Alan cavalryman, late 9th–early 10th century

The Alans of the Caucasus were descended from Iranian rather than Turkish-speaking nomadic steppe peoples. Now settled and seemingly prosperous, they survived centuries of nomadic invasion and conquest, adopting religions and elements of military style from their more powerful neighbours, but also retaining some distinctive features of their own. Among these were quilted hats or hoods, sometimes highly decorated, of which the lower part could be turned up as shown here. This mail-clad rider is equipped as a relatively lightly armoured horse-archer, with both sword and battle-axe for close combat. The abundance of decoration on his own gear and his horse's harness, the latter including tufts, bronze discs and silver bells, seems more suited to a festive occasion than to battle.

C3: Kabarian cavalryman, late 9th–early 10th centuries

There appear to have been significant variations in the military equipment and combat styles of different peoples across the sprawling Khazar Khaganate. Though of nomadic Khazar origin, the Kabarians of the west soon looked almost European, with their reliance on mail rather than lamellar armour. The iron vambraces and greaves shown here, consisting of simple iron splints riveted to leather linings, nevertheless remained characteristically Khazar, as is his segmented helmet adorned with a tuft and side-feathers. The man's weaponry, including full horse-archery equipment, spear, sword and axe, and his horse harness, are fully within a steppe tradition which would itself profoundly influence subsequent medieval Russian styles.



1: Turkic armoured cavalryman, 7th C
2: Magyar nobleman, late 9th–early 10th Cs
3: Slavic tribal leader, 9th C

D1: Turkic armoured cavalryman, 7th century

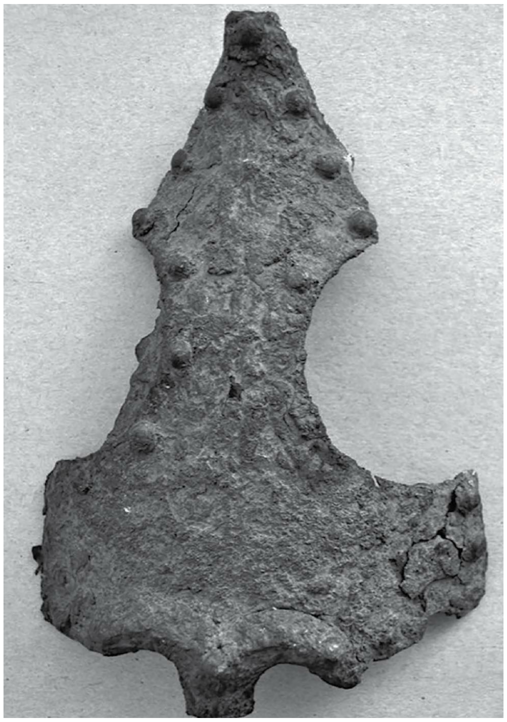
Various Turkic nomadic peoples inhabited the steppes to the east of the Khaganate, occasionally dominated by, or fighting either for or against the Khazars. Their military equipment had by now evolved into forms which would remain largely unchanged for centuries. The only unusual and perhaps old-fashioned aspect of this man’s armour is the double rounded breast protection made of sewn layers of rawhide. Otherwise it consists of a rawhide lamellar cuirass and upper arm defences, and a substantial mail aventail hanging from a helmet made of multiple scallop-shaped vertical splints laced together. Although he wields a two-handed lance he also carries a small round shield. The limited horse armour, protecting only the breast, is also of rawhide lamellar construction; like the rider’s cuirass, it is edged with spotted fur, perhaps leopard-skin.

D2: Magyar nobleman, late 9th–early 10th centuries

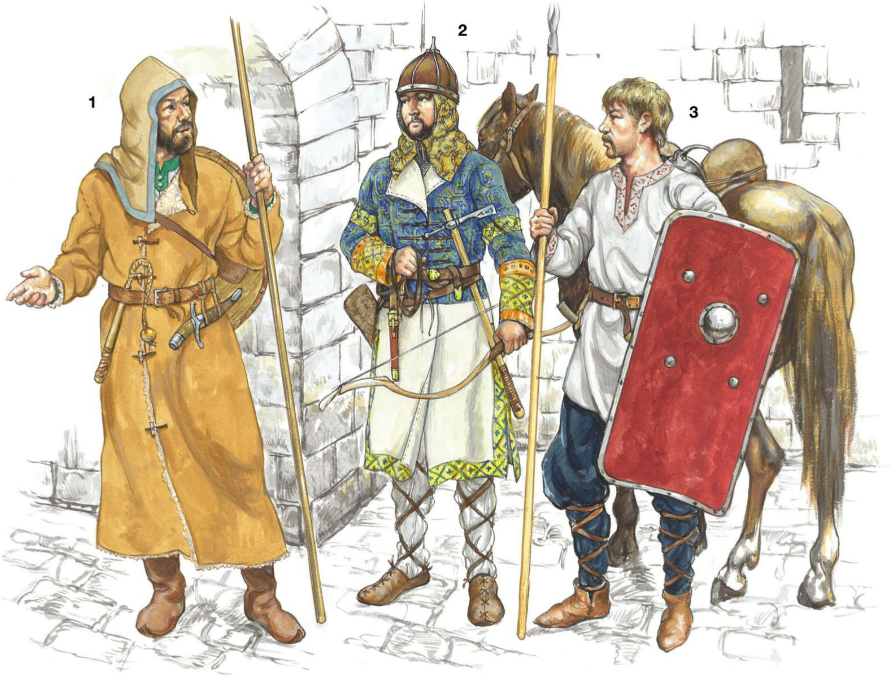
The Magyars who inhabited the steppes along and beyond the western frontiers of the Khaganate played a significant role in Khazar military history, and it is not surprising that their equipment had much in common with that of the Khazars. Yet they too also showed some distinctive features, not only in the decoration of weapons and horse harness but notably in their use of advanced forms of helmet. This example has an unusual, rather blunt-domed shape but is still made of large, directly riveted segments, with an iron nasal on a brow plate with three vertical extensions. (Within a few decades many of those Magyars who migrated further west into what became Hungary had helmets forged from a single piece of iron.) In addition to a full mail hauberk worn beneath his woollen coat, this nobleman also has a traditional iron lamellar cuirass with rawhide lacing, reaching to his knees above fancy-cut soft leather boots fastened with buckles. His weapons include spear, sabre, archery equipment with both a strung and an unstrung bow in two cases, and an axe hanging from his saddle.

D3: Slavic tribal leader, 9th century

In comparison with the Khazars, other Turks and the Magyars, most of the Slav tribes dominated by the Khazar Khaganate had rudimentary military equipment, being rarely rich enough to afford much beyond a spear, shield, and sometimes an axe. As a tribal leader this man has also acquired a battered old Byzantine helmet of iron with broad brow and fore-and-aft bands, a double-edged sword of perhaps central European origin, and a curved dagger. Nevertheless, his woollen tunic is covered in expensive imported silk; it has borders embroidered with a geometric pattern which may have served as a form of tribal identification, and his black cloak is fastened with a gilt brooch.



Frontal plate, with part of the ‘eyebrows’ and nasal, from a riveted helmet of the Khazar period found in the Caucasus region; compare with (1) in drawings on **here.** (Professor Murtazali Gadjiev via Adam Kubik)



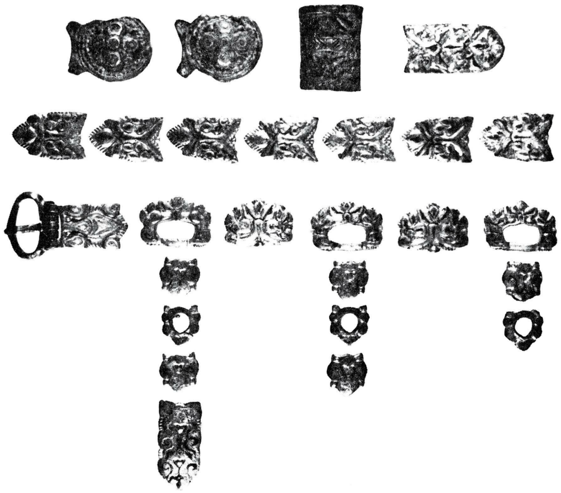
1: Urban militiaman, 8th C
2: Khazar tribesman, 9th C
3: Radmich Slav tribesman, 8th C

E1: Urban militiaman, 8th century

The Khazar state included substantial settled as well as nomadic populations, plus a number of important if small trading towns, mostly in the northern foothills of the Caucasus and on the great rivers which served as highways. It seems that some urban centres had forms of local militia, comparable to those of the Islamic world to the south. This man’s large, relatively stiff felt cap or hood also mirrors that of many peoples south of the Caucasus mountains; with their *khanjar* fighting knives, spears and large round shields, such men would not have looked out of place in Islamic Iran or Central Asia. However, note that this man also has tucked into his belt a simple form of *kisten* or war-flail, with a spherical bronze weight at the end of a thickly plaited rawhide strap attached to a wooden handle.

E2: Khazar tribesman on foot with packhorse, 9th century

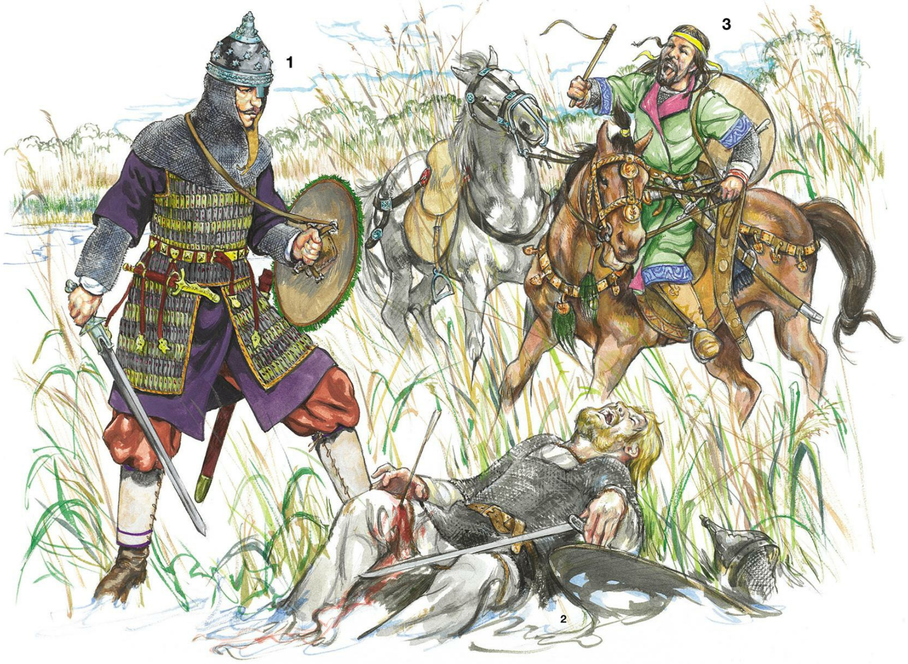
This tribesman's helmet is of a light form: a hardened leather bowl with slender vertical iron framing elements, a broader brow-band, and an iron finial. Nevertheless, some aspects of his clothing suggest that he is from a settled community in trading contact with wealthy regions beyond the frontiers of the Khaganate. His (probably mail) aventail is covered with a richly embroidered textile, and his white coat, which opens down the front with only a small overlap, is also covered on torso, sleeves and borders with decorative imported Persian silk. Under the coat he probably wears a short-hemmed and short-sleeved mail shirt. His shoes and the cross-binding around his legs show that he expects to walk more than to ride. His weapons are a bow, a fighting knife, and an axe with a characteristically slender blade balanced by a second projection behind the socket.



Khazar metal belt fittings from Sarkel, 10th century. (Archive of M Zhirohov)

E3: Radmich Slav tribesman, 8th century

This ordinary Slav tribesman only has a spear and dagger, while the rectangular shape of his large shield is hypothetical. His clothing is largely of linen; the simple embroidered pattern around the neck and cuffs of his tunic has been tentatively identified with the Radmich tribe, which lived along the upper reaches of the Dnieper river and its tributaries, on the north-western frontier of Khazar territory.



1: Khwarazmian Arsiya cavalryman, 9th–10th Cs
2: Viking raider, 10th C
3: Khazar light cavalryman, 9th C

F1: Khwarazmian cavalryman of Arsiya Guard, 9th–10th centuries
Many of the Khagan's Muslim Arsiya units originally came from one of the militarily and technologically most sophisticated (as well as one of the wealthiest) regions of Central Asia, and, when settled at the Khazar capital of Atil, they remained a military elite. This man has therefore been given the finest known arms and armour of the eastern provinces of the Islamic Caliphate, including a one-piece steel helmet with silvered stars riveted to the surface, a purely decorative silvered finial and a brow-band decorated in the same manner. The very short nasal bar may have protected the lacing of the deep aventail's facial flap, which is here shown unlaced. In addition to a long-sleeved mail hauberk under his coat, he wears a steel lamellar cuirass and separate tassets covering the thighs, with alternate rows of the lamellae gilded. His baggy trousers are confined by felt-lined leather gaiters, with upper and lower coloured lines around the whitened

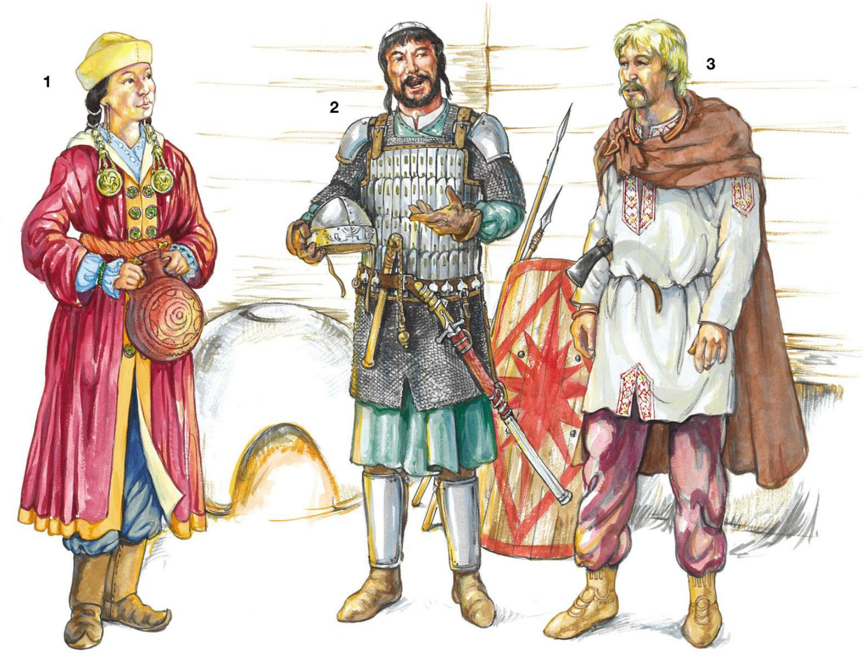
surface, and lacing up the inner legs. His double-edged straight sword has a silvered bronze hilt that includes a sleeve which passes outside the throat of the scabbard, and his shield is edged with tufted coloured wool. The *khanjar* at his right hip was a weapon shared by many peoples of the steppes. His horse (background) has relatively plain modern harness, but the silvered 'muzzle-bit' is an item that may have dated from pre-Islamic times.

F2: Viking raider, 10th century

This unfortunate has been hunted down on the banks of the lower Volga in 914. The Scandinavian raiders who became known as Varangians, and who created the first Russian state, were significantly better armed than the indigenous Slavs and Finns who inhabited these areas. Initially their daring and ferocity also enabled them to overawe some Muslim peoples along the shores of the Caspian Sea, but eventually they were expelled by both Muslims and Khazars. The man shown here has been given the mixture of equipment which would come to characterize the Varangians and the armies of early Kievan Rus. Thus the mail hauberk, shield and sword could be seen as Viking, while the segmented helmet and mail aventail might be considered early Russian.

F3: Khazar light cavalryman, 9th century

Not all Khazar cavalrymen were heavily armoured, even during the Khaganate's period of greatest prosperity. This man only has a long-sleeved mail hauberk plus a shield, sabre and archery equipment. His colourful coat is in the distinctively Turkish double-breasted style, showing contrasting lining and applied woven decorative bands at the edges. The horse's harness is ornamented in the steppe style, but the snaffle bit lacks vertical *psalion* bars. Some sources show an additional single strap terminating in a loop attached to the apex of the usual reins; this was probably not just a leading rein, but an aid to controlling the horse when the rider was using both hands to shoot the bow.



1: Magyar woman, 10th C
2: Khazar Jewish warrior, 9th C
3: Vyatchian Slav tribesman, 8th–9th Cs

G1: Magyar woman, 10th century

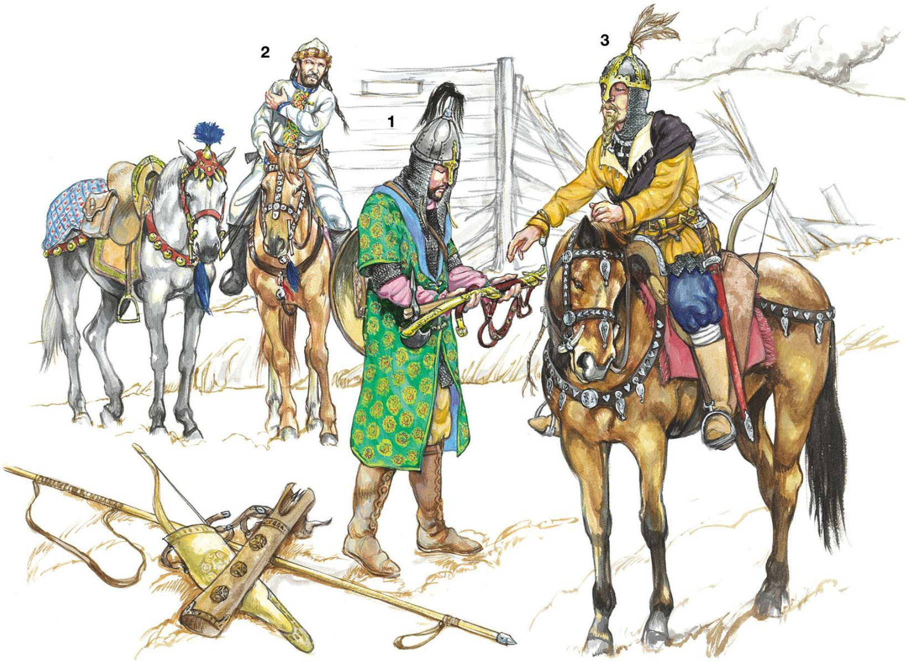
This scene is imagined in the interior of a turf-roofed timber house dug partly below ground level, and heated by a large clay oven. Most information about Magyar female costume comes from the period immediately after the western Magyars migrated from Ukraine across the Carpathian mountains onto the Great Hungarian Plain, but there is little reason to believe that the dress of either men or women had changed significantly during the previous few decades. The costume illustrated is based upon archaeological finds, the limited pictorial sources, and some hints in the written texts. Her elaborate hair decoration consists of large gold discs hanging from open ‘triangles’ at the ends of gold chains attached to her two ‘ponytails’; it is enough to identify her as a woman of wealth and social status.

G2: Khazar Jewish warrior, 9th century

How far the conversion of the Khazar ruling elite to Judaism filtered down into lower ranks of society remains a matter of scholarly debate; it may perhaps have been confined to the higher aristocracy, and the elites of some Khazar sub-tribes. Whether the Judaism practised by the Khazars was mainstream or otherwise is also a matter of some dispute. The prosperous tribesman shown here, wearing a fine silk coat under his war gear, has been given a *kippah* skull-cap and *payot* side-locks, though there is no real evidence for these being adopted by the Judeo-Khazars. Apart from a recently discovered segmented helmet with Jewish symbols on the front and back, which he carries, this man is equipped in typical Khazar style: a mail hauberk, a cuirass of large iron lamellae, iron shoulder plates, and strapped-on iron greaves. His weapons are a fine Khazar sabre with a lightly curved hilt and silvered fittings, and a war-flail with a bronze weight.

G3: Vyatchian Slav tribesman, 8th–9th centuries

The Vyatchi Eastern Slavs, from the Oka river basin south of present-day Moscow, were undoubtedly poor in comparison with their Khazar overlords, despite the metal torque worn around this man’s neck and his finely made leather boots. With neither helmet nor armour, his only protection is a substantial wooden shield, here leaning against the wall with one light and one heavier javelin; he also has an axe in his belt. The embroidered strips at the neck, chest, upper arms and hem of his linen shirt are again believed to have served as a form of tribal identification.



1: Khazar commander surrendering
2: Khazar warrior
3: Rus leader

H1: Khazar commander

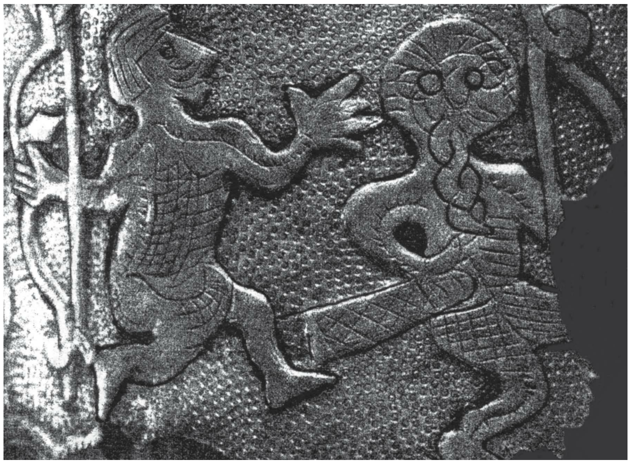
The wealth of the Khazar Khaganate, which had attracted the predatory attentions of the Varangian Rus, was reflected in the equipment of its military elites. However, there now appears to have been less use of lamellar armour and a seemingly greater reliance on fine-quality mail, like the short-sleeved hauberk worn by this senior figure handing over his sabre and axe to a victor in token of surrender. His helmet is still of segmented construction, similar to those of the Muslims to the south and the Rus to the north, and has a mail aventail which could probably be tied beneath the chin. His shield is probably of leather-covered wood, but might equally have been entirely of hide, and imported from far beyond Khazar territory. The shirt worn beneath his hauberk is, for example, of pink Chinese silk; his woollen coat is not only covered in patterned Persian silk but is cut in an originally Arab-Persian style as a *kaftan,* rather than in the considerably overlapping double-breasted Turco-Mongol manner. The embroidered ‘blanket’ which is tailored to go over and around the rump of his horse (background) was probably made locally.

H2: Khazar warrior

Hardly visible, the wounded warrior who accompanies his commander would also illustrate the multi-cultural character of the later Khazar Khaganate. Under his fur-trimmed cap, his long hair tied into pigtails is typically Turkish. His off-white coat, originally of Alan or Persian style, has blue edging at neck and cuffs and a broad band of red, yellow and blue patterned Persian silk all the way down the front, which is fastened with silver clasps. He might have a short double-edged broadsword imported from Russia, but with a German-made blade. His archery equipment and horse harness would still be of typical nomadic steppes types.

H3: Rus leader

By the end of the 9th century the Varangian Vikings who created the large and rapidly expanding state of Kievan Rus had adopted many aspects of the military technology of the Eurasian steppe peoples, mostly notably from the Khazars, and thus had little visibly in common with their Scandianian ancestors. Those Viking features which most obviously endured were straight, double-edged swords, and large-bladed war axes. This commander wears a silver neck torque with pendant Thor’s hammers, and his sword has a trilobate pommel, but the other aspects of his panoply are fully within the Eurasian steppe tradition. His helmet is gilded except for the steel bowl, and worn with a mail aventail. His short mail hauberk is concealed, except at the dagged hem, by a short, linen-lined, overlapping woollen coat; its horn buttons and cord loops are themselves hidden here by a dark cloak folded diagonally around the body and pinned on the right side. Linen puttees are wrapped around the woollen trousers, within soft leather boots. His archery equipment, riding whip and horse harness are all of steppes patterns (like the discarded bow and quiver of H1), though he might have an axe of Scandinavian form hung from the right of his saddle, perhaps with chiselled decoration on the blade suitable for his high status.



Detail of decorated silver strengthening band of a goat's-horn from the early Varangian 'Black Grave' (Chiornaia Mogila) barrow in Chernihiv, late 10th century. Identifiable details include reflex bows, a quiver (right), and apparently lamellar armour (left), but the right-hand figure appears to have a long plaited beard. By this date the Rus had adopted much of the material culture of the steppes. (Archive of M Zhirohov)

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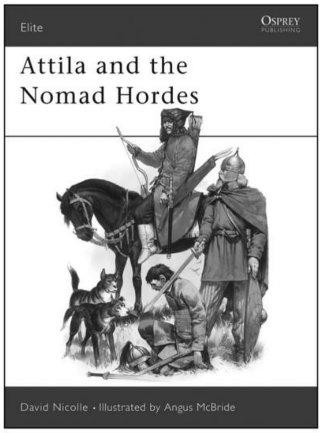
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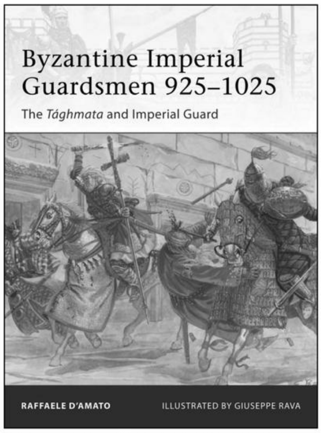
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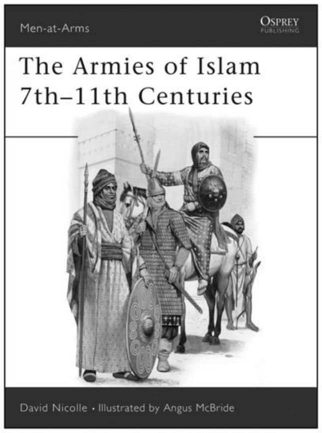
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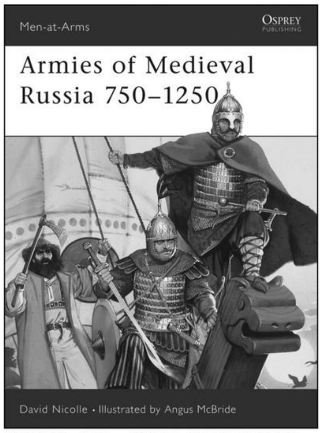
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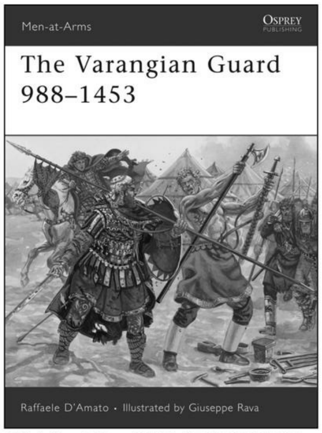
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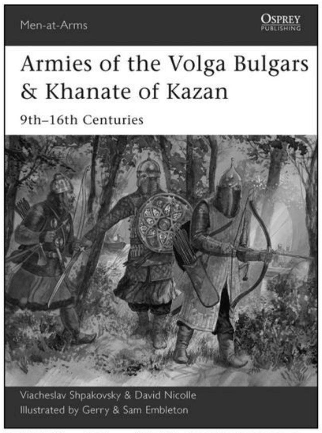
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Dedication by Mikhail Zhirohov

To the memory of my friends, and to the historian Sergey Orlov (died 2006). Lost, but never forgotten.

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